



DEAN HOLLINGSWORTH/Staff illustration

# pornification of the public square

**M**y friend Dave wrote me awhile back: “Channel-surfing with Jessica, who’s 9, we stopped at an early evening rerun of Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* — irreverent, we figured, but not wrong for her.

“Came the bit about the gay male escort/model who’d mysteriously gotten White House press clearance to represent a Republican-funded online ‘news’ service and lob the president softball questions. The show flashed a photo from the escort service’s Web site showing the man naked, spread-eagle, his genitals blurred.

“Jessie gasped. Her face clouded over and she looked our way but didn’t ask anything, and sometimes you just let things roll. We clutched hands silently, knowing damage had been done. I don’t want to beat up on Stewart; I’m a liberal. Maybe I should have used better judgment, but, man, my parents never had to think about jumping up and shielding my eyes when we watched Walter Cronkite.”

Why was the photo flashed? Was it news? Social commentary? Ratings lust? All of that, surely — even news of conservative sexual hypocrisy, of which there is no end. But “sex” itself is what sells: “People want it, so we are trying to provide it; the more X’s, the more popular,” an Adelphia Communications spokeswoman told *The Boston Globe* after the company,

among its other dubious distinctions, became the first U.S. cable provider to offer triple-X rated pornography.

What Dave’s family got wasn’t porn, exactly, but it forced him to think about how he’d explain to his 9-year-old that people sell their bodies — and that TV “sells” their doing it. That Dave faults his own judgment doesn’t quite make him fair game. It certainly doesn’t explain what’s coming to us unbidden in roadside “Erotic Empire” billboards, bus-shelter underwear posters, fashion-cum-kiddie porn ads, commercials for erectile dysfunction cures and the fetid currents wafting suddenly through our homes at prime time.

The thing that’s exposing itself to us increasingly is more degrading

Sex sells. And until liberals challenge the free speech that permits it, and conservatives protest the free market that pushes it, our kids will pay the price, says **JIM SLEEPER**

than porn because it’s so unchosen, so public and so purely commercial: The pornification of public spaces and narratives, an eros-burning equivalent of secondhand smoke, isn’t malevolent as much as it’s a mindless groping of our persons to goose profits and market share.

Don’t call it free speech; these sensors are beyond censors. They aren’t bringing us artists’ art, activ-

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# Sleeper

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ists' politics or fellow citizens' opinions, and the only social message in their leering come-ons is this: "Our company can bypass your brain and heart and go for your erogenous and other viscera on its way to your wallet. Nothing personal, by the way."

Nothing liberating, either — and my authority is the author of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, who thought porn "a sign of a diseased condition of the body politic." D.H. Lawrence wrote in 1929 that "even I would censor genuine pornography, rigorously," rebuffing "the insult it offers, invariably, to sex, and to the human spirit. ... There is no reciprocity ... only deadening."

Mr. Lawrence hated porn because he exalted sexual love. Unquestionably he'd have detested the commercialized, bare-it-all, flip side of porn's sneaking secrecy that's inundating us now, not least because, while he abhorred sneaking secrecy, he cherished modesty (and monogamy).

And let's not call our problem "liberal permissiveness." American liberals such as Tipper Gore and Bill Bradley protested years ago that by feeding kids "a menu of violence without context and sex without attachment," as Mr. Bradley put it, Americans who are letting corporate investment drive our public culture are abusing "the all-important role of storytelling, which is essential to the formation of moral education that sustains a civil society."

That protest was right, even if Mrs. Gore's call for warning labels was wrong. You don't have to want to rerun *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* or Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments* — with Charlton Heston as Moses, heaven help us — to have worries about such big public narratives as *Gladiator*, *Revenge of the Sith* or *Matrix II* — or to wonder why more worthy replacements, such as *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*, that affirm virtues like loyalty among friends and courage against darkness, have to be imported from a British public culture that is expiring, but a little less rapidly than our own.

To take proper account of this, we need to change the debate about pornography and freedom of expression in

this republic. We need to examine often-unconscious assumptions about where the problem is coming from and what kind of damage it is doing. Mr. Lawrence distinguished "superficial, temporary desires" from "impersonal great desires" that are nourished in noble public narratives, warning, "It is the business of our Chief Thinkers to tell us of our own deeper desires, not keep shrilling our little desires in our ears."

Yet we have no consensus or wisdom about the role of eros in social narratives that shape young people's social depths and horizons. Nor have we noticed that American conservatives generate not only repressions of eros, but also, and perhaps inevitably, its destructive, reactive explosions. Conservatives as well as liberals won't end this seesaw between moralism and decadence if they don't recognize their own hypocrisy in marketing little desires as spectacles.

Like the porn-inflected culture of the Weimar Republic, ours now skews the nervous systems, hormones and muscles of children like Jessica and of adolescents trying to negotiate erotic life. Parents struggle to lift up children's

hearts and inspire social graces not by railing against nudity or unconventional sexuality per se, but by acknowledging a deepening undertow of "violence without context and sex without attachment."

How far is it, really, from Jessica's confusion to darker burdens like those dramatized so movingly a few years ago on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and successor shows, burdens borne by young people at the edge of a social abyss largely unnoticed by their oblivious elders? After all, prime fare at present features TV confessional and reality shows whose participants (and audiences) shed civility for prurience and brutality.

Who is doing this to us, really? One familiar answer these days comes from Richard John Neuhaus, a Roman Catholic priest and conservative public intellectual, who laments the role he thinks liberal public leaders, especially, have played in stripping public discourse of the stories and arguments that used to affirm its decency.

In fact, conservative moralists won't begin to seriously address what is happening in our society until they take on the very market capitalism and consum-

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erist culture they uphold and promote. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* 30 years ago, Daniel Bell, no liberal, warned that free markets no longer make free men because “economic liberalism has become ... corporate oligopoly, and, in the pursuit of private wants, a hedonism that is destructive of social needs.”

Mr. Bell warned against both conservatives’ and liberals’ emphasis on material consumption as the engine and measure of social health.

Even economist John Maynard Keynes, who designed government-driven economic growth to increase material abundance, equality and social felicity, wrote later in life that he’d been wrong to “believe in a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people, ... who can be safely released from the outward restraints of convention and traditional standards and inflexible rules of conduct.”

Hoping to lift humanity by removing “outward restraints” of poverty and its attendant repressions, Mr. Keynes and colleagues had “completely misunderstood human nature, including our own. ... It did not occur to us to respect

the extraordinary accomplishment of our predecessors in the ordering of life ... or the elaborate framework which they had devised to protect this order.”

Mr. Keynes’ belated recognition that social life is too complicated to be redeemed through material progress alone is a rebuke not just to liberals or Marxists but also to a capitalist materialism that rationalizes the most disruptive and degrading effects of mass marketing and production.

While conservatives ignore criticism of corporate mass marketing — or, indeed, while they rationalize pumping its offerings into the national bloodstream — young people’s love and libido are indeed “melting into air” as markets deliver us from censors to sensors.

By defending business at all costs, today’s conservatives are tearing up the social contract they claim to defend. Corporate minions and shareholders who are busy hollowing out our children’s sense of themselves as rational citizens and even as sexual beings are among the real traitors to the civic-republican society our parents and grandparents struggled with, loved and served.

To acknowledge what’s happening to

us, we’d have to know that a society’s sexual narratives and imagery foretell its life and death; that, under the relentless, intimate blandishments of mass marketing, we are losing what Hannah Arendt called a “politics of natality” that welcomes the young into a society whose members care for and stimulate one another.

We are accustoming ourselves to what she called a “politics of mortality” whose self-fulfilling expectation is that your former fellow citizens, now a mob, will more often try to exploit and abuse you than encourage you.

Politically troubling effects will spread as long as the brutalization of American civic culture spreads. Take religion, which the writer Mark Lilla says is “dumbing [itself] down.” But the drift of formerly lapsed or apostate Americans into evangelical and fundamentalist mega-churches is less a change in “religion” as such than it is a stampede of individual reactions of millions of individual Americans to the loss of republican freedom at the hands of big-government liberals and free-market conservatives alike.

There will be more religious stampedes until a classical liberalism that

includes honorable conservatives can strengthen the public household. If republican liberals and conservatives can’t grasp and act on this truth, religious people will continue what Mr. Lilla calls their “demonization of popular culture,” for the simple reason that popular culture will continue to be more demonic.

Twentieth-century prophets of doom doubted that republican virtue would survive anything like the deluge of mindless, degraded come-ons I’ve described. Before we surrender, let’s see if we can begin a liberal-republican response to the corruption of the public household by shifting the debate away from imposing censorship to restricting the impersonal marketing sensorship that shrills our little desires so relentlessly that it drowns deliberation and then shoves mirrors at us that magnify our degradation.

We could, for starters, stop protecting as “free speech” degrading intrusions driven only by mindless bottom lining. Some legal scholars argue that the First Amendment was written to protect speech only by autonomous moral agents who may persuade one another in debate to transcend narrow

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self-interest — the essence of republican self-government and ordered liberty. “Freedom of speech” shouldn’t protect corporations, impersonal entities that are charter-bound to pursue only the narrow interests of shareholders who barely oversee their investments.

The best answers to this crisis confound left-vs.-right thinking. Recently, the leaders of 30 million evangelicals surprised liberals by opposing Bush administration environmental policies they claim violate their biblical injunction to take stewardship of God’s earth. Secular liberals could surprise them and conservative “media watch” groups like the Parents’ Television Council by opposing gratuitous violence and smut.

Transgression has its place, but isn’t this a season in the republic’s life to plant more than to despoil, to build up narratives more than to tear them down? Isn’t it time to change the debate by crossing some old lines?

A civic-republican ethos knows that there is a deep commercial and cultural connection that liberals and conservatives alike must make, in a public vocabulary that must somehow be revived.

The circle of death that is beginning

to encompass young children like Jessica has become a spiral that will not end until we find the courage to stop it, first by changing the debate. If more of us liberals could shed our defensiveness and inhibitions before everything that parades itself as free speech, and if conservatives could stop being defensive about everything that parades under the banner of “free markets,” we could all make tough judgments and strike a better balance.

“Fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread,” warns political philosopher Michael Sandel.

Civil-libertarian liberals must change the debate and their strategies, and to do that they need some impassioned, classical liberal wisdom like D.H. Lawrence’s and Daniel Bell’s. So does Jessica.



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