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THEY SAID IT

A society in which men and women are governed by belief in an enduring moral order, by a strong sense of right and wrong, by personal convictions about justice and honor, will be a good society – whatever political machinery it may utilize; while a society in which men and women are morally adrift, ignorant of norms, and intent chiefly upon gratification of appetites, will be a bad society – no matter how many people vote and no matter how liberal its formal constitution may be.

Russell Kirk, "Ten Conservative Principles," (adapted from *The Politics of Prudence*), 1993.

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AN ELITE OF AMORAL SUPERMEN.

Virtually all of the members of the conservative commentariat spent last week congratulating most of their left-leaning counterparts, in spite of their enduring political differences. Why, you ask? Because most of the members of the left's leadership had the good sense to condemn the recently arrested film director Roman Polanski for his monstrous crimes; to insist that his acts were, just that, monstrous; and to see past the "he's paid his debt by living as a fugitive for three decades" garbage being spewed by the Polish Pervert's lonely defenders. As *The Wall Street Journal's* James Taranto put it, "Roman Polanski seems to have accomplished what neither George W. Bush nor Barack Obama could: bringing together left and right in America."

As far as the commentary goes, let us add our congratulations to those Democrats and liberals who had the decency to speak out against Polanski. Strange as it may sound, that took some guts, because in so doing, those who condemned Polanski had to take on not just the Debauched Director himself, but the nation's cultural and artistic elites, who wield so much power and exert so much influence on the entertainment community specifically and on the cultural left in general. So one cheer for the brave souls among the left-leaning political and media types!

Why only one cheer?

Well, to be perfectly honest, we're not entirely certain that the condemnation of Polanski by the leftist journalists, columnists, editors, and bloggers is all that important – in a broader, cultural sense. It's reassuring, we guess, as a measure of current attitudes. But in the grand scheme of American culture, it really doesn't mean anything at all.

Now, let us be clear. We don't doubt for a second that most of those who have spoken out or written on the matter are sincere in their expressions of repulsion at the rape of a thirteen year-old girl (the details of which we will not go into here). Moreover, neither do we doubt for a second that the majority of left-of-center politicians and the overwhelming majority of their constituents are likewise repulsed by Polanski's crime and his thirty-year hiatus from justice. We simply doubt whether that repulsion matters much, in that that we doubt whether it reflects any understanding of or acceptance of responsibility for the cultural and moral forces at work in society and reflected in Polanski's defense.

How, exactly, did we, as a society, get to the point where it would actually be necessary for the arbiters of political discourse to speak out against a man who drugged, raped, and then, for good measure, anally raped a 7th-grader? On the flip side of the matter, how did we get to the point where some would feel it necessary to speak out in his favor? How did we get to the point where the cultural elites would think that his admitted crimes are somehow excusable? The specifics of this case may be so heinous and so vile as to repel the majority of Americans. But not all of them. Moreover, neither this crime nor its cultural rationalization occurred in a vacuum, which is to say that they are both, at least to some degree, demonstrative of a broad and treacherous cultural breakdown.

As we see it, the problem with most of the commentary on the subject is that it treats Polanski, his crimes, and his vile defenders as aberrations, which they are most definitely not. It is important to remember, we think, that for thirty years, this man lived as an international fugitive. And he lived, as a fugitive in luxury, free to ply his trade, earn millions of dollars (or francs, if you prefer), win an Oscar, and continue molesting teenage girls – such as Nastassja Kinski, whom Polanski started “dating” when she was only 15 and *after* he had pled guilty to his crimes in Los Angeles. In other words, it's not as if this guy spent his time living in caves with bin Laden or was some incredibly devious master of disguise. For thirty years,

authorities knew where he was, what he was doing, and how to get to him. They could have walked up and rung his doorbell, for crying out loud.

But they didn't. And then, when they finally did muster up the energy to grab the near-octogenarian, his native country and his host country both objected vehemently, in addition to those who defended him in the media and in the “arts” community. All things considered, Polanski was able to live a relatively normal life and was seen by his hosts as just another guy, a member of the French Academy of Fine Arts even. Sure, he couldn't fly to Hollywood to sit around and be bored to tears by Steve Martin en route to picking up his Oscar. But other than that, he spent thirty years as a generally typical wealthy European – albeit one with a legal cloud hanging over his head.

The fact of the matter is that in many ways, Polanski was just a typical man of privilege living a typical life in the post-modern West. His “acts” may have been particularly creepy and depraved, and they may technically have been criminal, but as self-serving and ultimately rationalized sexual deviancy goes, it's not as if he was particularly exceptional.

Heck, just this past week, one of the Filthy Filmmakers fellow “artists,” the left-leaning jokester (and scourge of Sarah Palin) David Letterman, admitted to a live studio audience that he liked to diddle the help and was being blackmailed for acts that he conceded were “creepy things.” Additionally, and more relevantly, the world learned last week that President Obama's recent nominee as Assistant Deputy Secretary of the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools at the U.S. Department of Education, a man named Kevin Jennings, is not just a gay activist but a radical gay activist who, among other things, has publicly professed his admiration for Harry Hay, the founder of the pedophile protection racket known as the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA).

Are either Letterman or Jennings criminals like Polanski? Not as far as we know. And we suppose that it's a little unfair to lump them in with him, given

that he's a convicted felon. But the point remains that self-absorbed sexual deviancy is part-and-parcel of modern American/Western life. It is who we, as a society, are.

Last month, the inimitable Mark Steyn noted that modern, Western democracy is characterized by a rapid and substantial intensification of sexual liberty and an almost equally rapid and substantial erosion in almost every other kind of liberty. To wit:

At some point we will come to see that the developed world's massive expansion of personal sexual liberty has provided a useful cover for the shrivelling of almost every other kind. Free speech, property rights, economic liberty and the right to self-defence are under continuous assault by Big Government. But who cares when Big Government lets you shag anything that moves and every city in North America hosts a grand parade to celebrate your right to do so? It's an oddly reductive notion of individual liberty. The noisier grow the novelties of our ever more banal individualism, the more the overall societal aesthetic seems drearily homogenized—like closing time in a karaoke bar with the last sad drunks bellowing off the prompter “I did it My Way!”

There's a reason for this, of course – a couple, actually. The first is obvious, and Steyn alludes to it. Sex is a primal instinct, one to which everyone is naturally predisposed. And manipulating or distracting the masses is best done with something to which everyone is naturally predisposed and which is therefore virtually guaranteed to manipulate or distract them. How do the robbers in the B-Films and cartoons get past the guard dog? They distract him with a big, juicy, tender piece of meat. Works just about the same way, we guess, with big shot entertainment and media types.

The second reason is a little more complicated and is, perhaps, best illustrated with a little history lesson.

Regular readers may recall that one of our favorite books of all time is a history of medieval religious heretical movements penned over half a century ago by the British historian Norman Cohn. Cohn's magnum opus, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, is a brilliant, if occasionally dry look at the history of the anti-establishment utopian religious movements that have dominated the history of Western civilization since its very inception.

One of the most important yet least known and least analyzed of the medieval Millenarian movements was the Brethren of the Free Spirit, practitioners of a heresy that troubled Christendom for the better part of the second millennium A.D. The essential doctrinal teaching of the Free Spirit was that God was present and tangibly incarnate in all of creation and that man could therefore experience God directly and achieve spiritual and physical union with Him, making sin no longer possible. The practical expression of that doctrine was, almost always and everywhere, sexual license. Or as Cohn put it:

The adepts of the Free Spirit . . . were intensely subjective, acknowledging no authority at all, save their own experiences . . .

The core heresy of the Free Spirit lay in the adept's attitude toward himself: he believed that he had attained a perfect so absolute that he was incapable of sin. Although the practical consequences of this belief could vary, one possible consequence was antinomianism or the repudiation of moral norms . . . In Christian civilization, which attached particular value to chastity and regarded sexual intercourse outside marriage as particularly sinful, such antinomianism took the form of promiscuity on principle.

Now, we should note that despite the fact that “the literature on the heresy of the Free Spirit . . . is scanty indeed,” we know from Cohn that the movement was vastly widespread and existed in some form or

another for more than five centuries. Moreover, it had identifiable precursors and successors, both of which extend its influence. Cohn writes:

In the social – as distinct from the purely political – history of western Europe the heresy of the Free Spirit played a more important role than Catharism. The area over which it extended was, by medieval standards, a vast one. . . And this movement had an extraordinary capacity for survival; for constantly harassed by persecution, it persisted as a recognizable tradition for some five centuries . . .

Within the area of Western Christendom, the heresy of the Free Spirit cannot be identified with any certainty before the beginning of the thirteenth century. On the other hand, analogous cults did flourish before that time both in the area of Eastern Christendom and in Moslem Spain. Almost from its beginnings, the Armenian Church had to cope with the mystical sect known as the Euchites or Messalians, which flourished in the area around Edessa as early as the fourth century. The Euchites were wandering “holy men” who lived by begging; and they cultivated a self-exaltation that often amounted to self-deification, and an antinomianism that often expressed itself in anarchic eroticism.

The point of all of this is that this idea that “liberation” can and should be achieved exclusively through sexual expression is hardly new. Indeed, it is nearly as old as Christianity itself. The pseudo-intellectuals and cultural elites who today advocate greater and greater sexual liberty and libertinism think of themselves as pioneers of sorts, as valiant harbingers of a better, less repressive world. But the fact of the matter is that they are anything but. They are derivative. They are the successors to the antinomian, sexual comen that have plagued Western civilization for centuries.

The idea that sex and greater and greater expressions of sexual promiscuity and depravity alone can bring liberation is an old and tired one. As Cohn notes, the particulars of Christian theology and respect for sexuality have made sex the natural target for would-be liberators from time immemorial. There is nothing new or particularly inspired in this. It is the same old rot that has always been advocated by the “revolutionary” aesthetes and artists.

Today’s post-modern intellectuals fashion themselves as progressive, secular, and distinctive. Their philosophy is derived from Foucault, Derrida, and Rorty, and was forged in the great social upheaval of the 1960s. But even this is just tiresome twaddle based on intellectual fraudulence and an ignorance of history. The delineation of this same set of ideas about sex and liberty is easily traced from the Swabian heretics to the Brethren of the Free Spirit, to the Ranters, to the Romantics, to the nihilists, and right on down to our own post-modernists. As Cohn noted:

These people [the Brethren and their antecedents] can be regarded as remote precursors of Bakunin and of Nietzsche – or rather of that bohemian intelligentsia which during the last half-century has been living from ideas expressed by Bakunin and Nietzsche in their wilder moments . . .

What emerges [from a study of the Brethren of the Free Spirit] is an entirely convincing picture of an eroticism which, far from springing from a carefree sensuality, possessed above all a symbolic value as a sign of spiritual emancipation – which incidentally is the value which “free love” has often possessed in our own times.

Sex is politics, in other words; it is a means by which to declare and demonstrate liberation from the “chains” of traditional religious, social, and political mores and to challenge the status quo and affect “progress.” Or as the left itself has put it for the last nearly half

century: the personal – in this case the sexual – is political. To take it back to Steyn, the reason sexual liberty has been increasing, even while every other sort of liberty has been declining, is because sex is and always has been the tool by which the revolutionary spirits attempt to demonstrate their radical *bona fides* and to declare their independence from the forces of traditionalism.

What this means, then, is that the case of Roman Polanski and his ghastly defenders in Europe, in the media, and especially in Hollywood is our old “clash of moral systems” writ large; a collision between the traditional Western morality of the Judeo-Christian spirit and the post-modern moral conventions that are themselves derived from the capricious and ignominious Millenarian heresies that have always exemplified Western civilization.

Worse than that, actually, the Polanski debacle can actually be seen as a parody of our clash of moral systems. Last week, in the wake of Polanski’s arrest, the movie mogul and Hillary Clinton supporter Harvey Weinstein, a vulgar and base man whose contributions to the world of cinematic “art” include such “classics” as *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and *Pulp Fiction*, circulated a petition in support of Polanski and demanding his release. When criticized for his support of an admitted child-rapist, Weinstein, in a classic expression of arrogant and ignorant cultural elitism and pseudo-moralism, declared that, “Hollywood has the best moral compass, because it has compassion.”

Yikes. Could there possibly be a more succinct and more powerful summation of the moral bankruptcy that underpins the post-modern left? Morality, you see, is measured in thoughts and preferences; in motives, donations, and expressions of support; not in actual actions. Or as Mark Steyn put it:

Hollywood bigshots have “compassion” for people in general, for people far away in a big crowd scene on the distant horizon, for people in a we-are-the-world-we-are-the-children sense. But

Hollywood bigshots treat people in particular, little people, individuals, like garbage. To Polanski, he was the world, you are the children; now take your kit off and let’s have a “photo shoot.”

All of this brings us back, at long last, to the media and political types to whom we gave one cheer at the beginning of this piece. We’re pleased that child rape is still considered by most decent people – left, right, and otherwise – to be a moral infamy. But we’re not entirely comfortable with the idea that it will always be so. Just a few decades ago, for example, it would have been unacceptable to most Americans for a President of the United States to be carrying on a sordid affair with a young intern in the Oval Office – which, of course, is the reason why a complicit press hid the truth about Jack Kennedy from the American people. Today – or even eleven years ago, to be more precise – the type of sexual depravity engaged in by Bill Clinton is considered a “private” matter and, in any case, hardly important given Clinton’s “compassion” and his stand on “women’s issues.”

Is anyone even remotely surprised that our first discussion of the Brethren of the Free Spirit came in a piece titled “Let the Big Dog Run,” and published in April, 1998, at the height of the Lewinsky scandal?

We’re not exactly big fans of slippery slope arguments. But at the same time, there can be little question about the direction of history on these matters. As Steyn notes, “Earlier bad boys — Lord Byron, say — were obliged to operate as ‘transgressive’ artists within a broader moral order. Now we are told that a man such as Polanski cannot be subject to anything so footling as morality.” This is “progress,” we guess, at least to many on the other side of the clash of moral systems. And thus has it always been.

Which leaves us with two questions. First, how far will this “progress” progress? If Oval Office sex with girls slightly older than one’s daughter are okay, can a little drug-assisted, forced anal rape be far behind?

Second, will Western civilization, at some point, muster the strength to defend itself against this heresy as it always has before?

We have no idea what the answer to the first question is and, in fact, shudder to think about it.

As for the second one, we are, sadly, not particularly optimistic.

And the implications of such an answer are far too vast even to contemplate.

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