
Subject: The sexual revolution and its modern aftermath.

Posted by [Mark L](#) on Sun, 19 Feb 2023 20:38:39 GMT

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The author (Tara Hendry) is a leftie who got fed up with our public broadcaster (CBC) here in Canada and quit saying they were all slaves to their ideology. Or something similar. She started her own substack newsletter. In this one she interviews a cultural critic who has plenty to say about the sexual revolution and its modern aftermath. Highly interesting. I'm going to do a cut and paste as its behind a firewall. Someone sent it to me.

If you're interested in her substack page you can sign up here for the free stuff

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LEAN OUT WITH TARA HENLEY

Transcript: Mary Eberstadt

My conversation with the American essayist, novelist and cultural critic

Who am I? What am I here for? These are fundamental questions in life -- and throughout human history, they've often been answered through relationships to kin.

But with the collapse of the family unit and the atomization of individuals, my guest on this week's program argues, we have become unmoored. And we are now experiencing a crisis in identity, "a psychic howl" that's shaping our culture and politics in profound ways.

Mary Eberstadt is an American essayist, novelist, and cultural critic. Her latest book is *Adam and Eve After the Pill, Revisited*. But today we're going to talk about her previous title, *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics*.

TH: Mary, welcome to Lean Out.

ME: Thank you, Tara. It's great to be here.

TH: It's nice to have you on. As I mentioned to you, this book has had a huge impact on me. In *Primal Screams*, you argue that identity politics was not born out of liberation, but out of desperation. That this is a survival strategy. That the pain we are seeing expressed in this movement is very real. People just aren't claiming to be victims. They are victims -- but not of what they think they are. You're saying that this psychic howl that we're witnessing is about pain over dissolution of close, intimate bonds. Walk me through how you think this state of affairs came about.

ME:Â Yeah, thank you, Tara. First, I would like to say that I know this is a contrarian take. Because most people tend to divide on this issue into two camps. They either embrace identity politics or they dismiss all of that as snowflake-ism, as the actions of supposedly spoiled children. But I think there's something very different going on that needs to come to light. Identity politics -- to go back to the beginning -- was born in 1977. The phrase was first used in a document by radical African American feminists called theÂ Combahee River Collective. That document is a profoundly sad manifesto. It shows you the true origins of this desire to leave the rest of the world behind and band together with people who are just like us. In that manifesto, the authors explain that they are going to stick together as a political and social unit because they cannot trust the men in their lives. They don't believe in the traditional family. They think the only people they can trust to have their backs are people exactly like them.

We see this echo, all these decades later, growing stronger and stronger with the passage of time. We hear this emanating from groups like Black Lives Matter, which is a direct descendant of the Combahee River Collective. But not only Black Lives Matter, all of the identitarian groups that we are seeing today, that are increasingly affective in our politics, are coming out of this same broken place.

Because what's happened since 1977, of course, is that families have also imploded. Families are smaller, families are often broken. Something like 40 percent of American kids are growing up without a biological father in the home. And this means a lot of things, I think, for the way we do politics. It means a lot for our society, because it means that people have reduced social knowledge, for example, including social knowledge of the opposite sex. And as you know, I get into this inÂ Primal ScreamsÂ by talking about animal science, because that often gives us a safer way of broaching these subjects. But going back to the foundation of identity politics, it's a place of despair and distrust -- this, I think, is what continues to motivate people who embrace these identity groups as if they were families.

TH:Â It's the lack of real families in their lives. Is that what you're saying?

ME:Â Absolutely.

TH:Â I wonder, too, this Great Scattering that you write about -- you've identified that it's not just about family shrinkage and the extended family, it's about family implosion. So, I want to start with this idea of family breakup. There is a huge body of evidence showing how it impacts children not having a father in the home. This still does not really get talked about. It is still somewhat of a taboo to go there. But what does the data tell us about the impact of fatherlessness?

ME:Â Well, Tara, it's the best known fact in sociology. As James Q. Wilson -- the late, great social scientist -- pointed out long ago, everybody knows about the connections between fatherlessness and truancy, poor educational performance, criminality, drug use, early sexual experience, that list could go on and on. And to enumerate those things is not to point fingers at anybody. The reason we have so much trouble talking about these things is that so many families are affected. And

perhaps one reason I feel free to discuss them is that I was myself raised by a single mother for some years. So I don't feel that trepidation that many people do when they take these things into the public square.

But the point in *Primal Screams* is that we have reached a place where we can no longer ignore these things out of a desire to be polite. Because this social disintegration of the family unit is now affecting our politics and our wider society in ways that I think everybody is aware of. You hear Americans from all over the political spectrum decrying our divisiveness, and the rise of violent language, and the real violence in the streets, et cetera.

What I'm trying to do is get at the thing that's powering all of this. That's not to say there aren't other causes of our ills. But this family implosion is the least understood and the least acknowledged causes. That's why I think we need to zero in on it.

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TH: You also talk about family shrinkage as a significant fact. And that it becomes more dramatic over time, and more dramatic at the end stage of life. Talk to me about your research in that area.

ME: This is something that occurred to me years ago. Several years ago, I idly Googled the words "loneliness studies," because I had seen that phrase used. Loneliness was a thing that was being studied. And to my surprise, there were thousands of entries from countries all over the West. If you Google "loneliness Portugal," "loneliness West Germany," "loneliness Canada," you'll find plenty of examples of this trend. Loneliness has come to be a very studied area of sociology. It seems to be worst in the 20s and at the end of life.

My point is to connect the dots and to ask: Why do we have so many lonely old people? The answer is that we've had 60 years of the Sexual Revolution, which has shrunk families. Many people decided not to form families in the first place. And the result -- which is completely unintended -- is that people are reaching one of the most vulnerable phases of their life without anyone in attendance. There's some very poignant examples given in the book, in the footnotes, of what I am describing.

So, loneliness, again, is connected to this social fracturing that we are seeing. Lonely people are people who are not learning from others. Another example of the breakdown in social learning is the fact that so many households are now households of one person. This, again, is factoring into the wider world.

TH: Let's pause for a moment, as we get into this, and define what we're talking about when we talk about the Sexual Revolution -- for people who may not be clear.

ME: Yeah, sure. This is a non-controversial definition. I think most people would agree that the Sexual Revolution comes into being due to the technological shock of the birth control pill. When the birth control pill was legalized in the early 1960s, pretty much across the West, it was widely embraced and it was widely hailed as something that would liberate people. This is something that

is harder to see today, when the negative consequences of this thing are all around us. But at the time, people thought it would strengthen marriage to have widespread contraception. People thought it would give women a stronger hand in the workplace, which absolutely it has -- it has increased women's earning power tremendously. People thought that it would be good, even in the sense that it would reduce the need for abortion. The argument was that if we have more contraception, we'll have less abortion. It seemed reasonable.

These things didn't come true. Instead, what happened was that in tandem with the adoption of the birth control pill, aka the Sexual Revolution, rates of fatherlessness and rates of abortion and rates of broken homes skyrocketed, as did out-of-wedlock births. The reasons for this are deep and complicated, and they have been studied by perfectly secular economists. Religion has nothing to do with this argument, is what I'm trying to explain. But the consequences of broken homes is a direct descendant of this Sexual Revolution. And that's what, again, is at the forefront of many of our social problems, I believe.

TH:Â Circling back to the elderly now. The pushback I hear from liberals to this [critique of family dissolution] is often this: "Look, we're not denigrating the family. We're just saying that family comes in different forms now -- and that chosen families can be as powerful as biological ones." Why is that not the case?

ME:Â That's a great question. I think one reason is that the presence of protective males is very important to the flourishing of women. That's a transgressive thing to say. But let me give the example of the #MeToo phenomenon, because I think that's striking. We had hundreds of women coming forward in 2018, and afterwards -- the products of elite education -- saying that these terrible things had happened to them, that predatory men in powerful positions had done X, Y, and Z. And without judging either side in any given case, what was striking about those reports was that these young women had apparently been launched into the world with no one having their backs. In almost none of these #MeToo stories was there a father, for example, who came forward to confront the man who had done these terrible things. There were, in my reading, no mention of protective brothers or uncles. Once in a while, one would find an account of a boyfriend confronting said man. But this is striking. It is to say that the women who are now having all the advantages that their grandmothers only dreamed of have nevertheless got a kind of cluelessness about social relations. I think, again, that this is coming from the fact that fewer of them are growing up with brothers, uncles, fathers, and the rest -- protective male figures -- simultaneously.

Men without things to protect are more likely to become predators. Men growing up without sisters, or in dysfunctional mother-led homes, are suffering the same kind of social deficit from a different direction.

So, to the question: Why can't chosen families do the same thing? We only need to know that children in homes without biological fathers, but with father figures -- stepfathers, mom's boyfriend, et cetera -- are at much higher risk of all kinds of abuse. That's all we have to know to

know that the experiment of putting children willy-nilly into homes with unrelated men is probably not a good idea.

TH:Â I want to unpack this more. When you say "cluelessness about social relations," what do you mean by that, for women? And what do you mean by that, for men?

ME:Â It seems as if young women are being raised without ever being told fundamental things. Like, for example, "Don't go to your boss's hotel room at two in the morning, even if he summons you there." These are common sensical things. One has to conclude that their schools, and the families that they come from, have adopted this idea that there's no difference between men and women. But that idea is overruled by sheer physical force every day.

So, what I mean about a breakdown in social learning is that we have this ironic outcome, where this is probably the generation since the Sexual Revolution that are the most sexually experienced -- but at the same time increasingly sexually unknowing about the opposite sex. This is a paradox that I think goes deep, and is something we need to think about when we hear stories about sexual harassment on campus. For example -- again, without prejudging any individual case -- it's clear that there are a lot of mixed and missed signals between the sexes these days. And that it didn't used to be this way.

TH:Â What is it that men are not learning when families are imploding and shrinking?

ME:Â Well, again, I think the fact that men very often aren't "assigned" -- to use that word -- to protect. To protection. In other words, if they don't have sisters, functional mothers, other women in their lives with whom they can play that role, then they grow up on violent video games and all the rest of it, warped by pornography, and they carry a lot of lies about the opposite sex into their romantic attachments.

There's also the fact that because of the implosion of the family, fewer and fewer young people have experience with babies and toddlers. Once upon a time, it would've been considered strange for a woman to reach middle age without ever having held a baby. But in our society, that's not statistically a tiny number of people. Why does this matter? Again, because babies and toddlers teach protection and protectiveness. It's very hard to be around them without feeling those things. I believe their increasing absence in our society -- and that the lack of connection to those younger and weaker than we are -- is not well understood.

TH:Â I want to talk about marriage for a moment. We know that in my lifetime, marriage has collapsed, basically. But it's collapsed selectively. It's collapsed for working class people and for middle class people. But elite marriages have held strong. You talk about this phenomenon in the book of "talking left, but acting right."Â Rob Henderson calls these luxury beliefs. Talk to me about that phenomenon.

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ME:Â Well, I think it's a chicken and egg thing, in a way. Why is it that people who have the most materially are more likely to be married than those who aren't? I think part of the reason is that family fracture is expensive. Divorce cuts in half a household's earning, and creates two households. This too, I think, is not well understood. But what I'm saying is that part of the reason that people with wealth are more likely to be married is that they haven't squandered that wealth, however inadvertently, by a family breakup. So that's one part of the picture. I think the other part is that there is a kind of hypocrisy there -- that is correctly pointed out -- by people who enjoy all the benefits of a stable family life themselves, but who want the public virtue signalling of saying, "This isn't really that important." This, too, is pretty new.

TH:Â I can see some Millennials, and younger, hearing this argument and going, "Okay, well, housing is through the roof. It's really hard to even find an affordable place to rent, let alone buy. And jobs are very precarious. So, as much as we would like the stable benefits of family, we don't have the economic ability to do that." What do you say to the argument that this is about economics as much as anything else?

ME:Â The first thing I would say is money isn't everything, and every individual has to decide what box to put it in at some point -- where it is in the list of priorities. But also, I have a lot of sympathy for Millennials and Zoomers who say those things. And again, I'm not making a monocausal argument. A lot has happened economically that has made it harder on younger people, beginning with student debt and being allowed to accumulate so much of it.

But I'd also say, Tara, that the reducing of that feeling of obligation toward family, that the weakening of the family, is part of this picture too. I remember in the 1980s there was a popular bumper sticker. It said, "I'm spending my children's inheritance." And people would put it on the back of an RV, or a fancy car, and it was supposed to be funny. But if you think about it, it's not really funny. That was a kind of bellwether -- that already the connection between generations and the feeling of obligation between generations was wobbling. And part of the reason that Millennials and Zoomers are worse off than their parents is that, I think, many Boomers have been way less attentive to their financial responsibilities to their kids. Excessive consumption has reduced intergenerational wealth. And intergenerational wealth doesn't have to mean millions of dollars. But I think there's been an erosion of the idea of financial stewardship, and its importance to subsequent generations.

TH:Â There is a collapse of trust between generations. There's a collapse of trust between men and women. This is probably the biggest question we can ask, but: How do we start to rebuild that trust -- particularly between men and women?

ME:Â It's like any other problem. The first thing we have to do is get the diagnosis right before we can talk about a cure. That's what I'm trying to do here. I think there's a lot of confusion about what ails us. Young people rage against heteronormativity, and the patriarchy, and all of these isms. They don't understand that these are abstractions that are like band-aids over something

that needs stitches. These are not the problems that they face.

I'm very encouraged, honestly, by the attention since #MeToo to relations between the sexes. It is now possible, outside of religious orbits, to say, "Was the Sexual Revolution a good thing?" Back when I started writing about this that was considered something that would get you drummed out of polite society. But now we know there have been several books recently in the UK, in Germany, in France, by people who are not cat's paws of the Catholic church, raising these questions. And I think there's going to be more of that.

I think the tragic slew of recent shootings also raises that question all over again. People are starting to understand that at the bottom of these kinds of tragedies is a lonely individual who's acquired weapons, and who almost invariably comes from a terrible situation. This is what I mean about social consequences that can no longer be ignored. And I do think there is rising consciousness of all that.

TH: I think so too. Primal Screams came out in 2019. As you say, last year Louise Perry in the UK published her book, The Case Against The Sexual Revolution. Christine Emba in the States published Rethinking Sex. I know you have another book that just came out last month, Adam and Eve After the Pill, Revisited, and I understand you reflected in it on the unrest of 2020. What is your take on what was going on there?

ME: So, in 2020, there were over 10,000 incidents of what was called unrest, that summer following the killing of George Floyd. And of those incidents, some 500 turned violent, according to the most authoritative study that we have. This was unprecedented in American history. It led me to dig a little deeper into the various stories, what was going on in Portland, for example, what was going on in Kenosha. And what I found over and over was a common denominator, which is if we were talking about the people responsible for various shootings, or the people being arrested in various riots, almost always they were coming from a home without a father in it. Again, this is one of the best known facts in sociology. Very often they were allied with identity groups of the left or right.

For all the talk of far right identity groups -- the people who talk about them have not connected the dots between where those people are coming from. They are also coming out of broken situations. Without naming names, I list this in several paragraphs in one chapter in the new book. Because I think it's really striking that the lack of family is also related to these protests in the first place. By protests here, I'm thinking of Portland, and night after night attacking the police in this kind of theatrical political violence. The people who are doing this kind of thing are not leaving little kids and wives at home to do it. In other words, they're also unattached free-floating free radicals, really, in a society that has too much of this.

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TH: I want to close by spending a moment on where we go from here. I think this is an incredibly useful diagnosis. I wonder about what the prescription is. I mean, it does seem unlikely that we

can reverse some of these trends. And yet I do see this current state of affairs as intolerable. Where do you see us going from here?

ME:Â So, on the political level, I'm encouraged by the new experiments by some States with paying attention to education and what kids are being taught when they're trapped in school eight hours a day. Because identitarianism, of both the gender variety and the toxic racial stuff, has seeped into the public schools. I think it's very important to be calling this out and correcting it, so that we're not raising up yet another generation that doesn't know any other way of looking at the world. So, that's good and that's important. And I think it's wonderful that there have been pioneers at that.

On another level, paradoxically, as familiar as I am with the social science, I don't think it convinces people very well. I think James Q. Wilson understood this decades ago. We have to keep putting it out there; the monks of the Middle Ages had to keep recording civilization, even if people wouldn't see what they were doing for hundreds of years, or understand it. But at the grassroots level, it doesn't really help people to wave a study in their face and say, "See." What I'm saying is that the power of example matters a lot. We seem to be learning since the Sexual Revolution, at least, about these matters. That it's harder to argue people into things and better to lead by example.

There's a story I like to tell -- it picks me up when I think about it -- of a young woman who came forward after a talk I gave several years ago. She said, "I've converted, I've become a Christian." I said, "Oh. Well, how did that happen?" She explained that she'd been raised by a single mother in a very left wing home. She had a friend in high school who came from a large, vibrant Catholic family, as it happened. She said, "It was weird to me at first, but I found myself more and more drawn to her house. There were all these people in it, something was always happening." She said, "Finally, I realized that I wanted what they had. I wanted what they had."

I think of that story often when I see riots in the streets, or the faces of these kids on campus who are duct-taping their mouths shut and stomping around protesting speakers. Because underneath all of that, I'm sure, is the same desire that she expressed. And that's what we have to connect with. We have to connect with that pain, and say, "There is another way."