



**THE CASE
AGAINST THE
SEXUAL
REVOLUTION**

**A NEW GUIDE
TO SEX IN THE
21ST CENTURY**
**LOUISE
PERRY**

For the women who learned it the hard way

Plus, Perry's author of *What Do Men Want?*

But it goes even deeper. We have been told the best feminism is one that teaches "sex work", online pornography and casual hook-ups. To feel otherwise brands a woman not just as uncool but outright lost in an ocean of sexual politics. Now the bell has been rung and the gender war has begun. It is time for feminism to level up. In this thoughtful, timely and witty book, explore the "new politics" of feminism as a liberating force for women's lives. Discover new ways of thinking, new ways of speaking, and new ways of living.

James Turner, *Times* columnist and author of *What Do Men Want?*

The Case Against the Sexual Revolution

A New Guide to Sex in the 21st Century

LOUISE PERRY

1. Sex Must Be Taken Seriously
2. Men and Women Are Different
3. Pornography and the Sexual Revolution
4. Loveless Sex Is Not a Virtue
5. Consent Is Not Enough
6. Violence Is Not Love
7. The Case Against the "New Politics" of Feminism
8. What Men Want

Cambridge 2022

polity

apron, the modern 'angel of the bedroom' hides her pubic hair. This waxed and willing swan glides across the water, concealing the fact that beneath the surface she is furiously working to maintain her image of perfection. She pretends to orgasm, pretends to like anal sex, and pretends not to mind when the 'friends with benefits' arrangement causes her pain. I've spoken to women who suffered from vaginismus for years without telling their partners that being penetrated was excruciating. I've also spoken to women who have had abortions after hook-ups and never told the men who impregnated them because, while sharing the inside of their bodies was expected, revealing the inconvenient fact of their fertility felt too intimate. We have smoothly transitioned from one form of feminine subservience to another, but we pretend that this one is liberation.

This pretence hurts the Marilyn Monroes, particularly when they are poor and friendless, and I want above all in this book to speak to the young women who have been lied to by liberal feminism and so risk following a very, very dangerous example.

But the would-be Hugh Hefners are also hurt by the pretence, albeit in a less obvious way. Mouldering away in the Playboy mansion doesn't kill a person, but it does corrode them. True happiness is not to be found on a soiled mattress being ridden by a woman who doesn't even like you.

Liberal ideology flatters us by telling us that our desires are good and that we can find meaning in satisfying them, whatever the cost. But the lie of this flattery should be obvious to anyone who has ever realised after the fact that they were wrong to desire something, and hurt themselves, or hurt other people, in pursuing it. So I am going to propose an alternative form of sexual culture – one that recognises other human beings as real people, invested with real value and dignity. It's time for a sexual counter-revolution.

2

Men and Women Are Different

A Natural History of Rape by Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer is not a book that feminists are supposed to like.¹ It isn't even a book that feminists are supposed to read. Following its publication in 2000, the authors of this academic book were widely denounced in the media and for a while received so many credible death threats that they were advised by the police to check their cars for bombs regularly.² Thornhill and Palmer's efforts to offer an evolutionary explanation for rape were not – to put it mildly – generally well received.

But when I first came across the book, I read it compulsively, all in one sitting, and was left by the end feeling both disconsolate and oddly satisfied. I was working at the time at a rape crisis centre. My job was to work one-to-one with women and girls who had been raped, but I also had a teaching role, training volunteers for our helpline and going into schools to teach consent workshops. The ideology that I was expected to teach leaned heavily on a very particular academic model of rape, and over time I had developed doubts about this model. *A Natural History of Rape* was a revelation to me because it articulated those doubts and gave them substance. I learned that I hadn't been wrong to think that there was a problem

with the conventional feminist understanding of rape – the problem really was there, and it couldn't be wished away.

The 1975 book *Against Our Will* by Susan Brownmiller remains the foundational feminist text on the subject of rape. Indeed, it has become a classic, so much so that in 1995 it was selected by the New York Public Library as one of 100 most important books of the twentieth century.³ Its fame is deserved, since Brownmiller's analysis was revolutionary, if flawed, and arrived at a crucial historical moment during the height of the feminist second wave. In particular, Brownmiller's claim that rape has historically more often been conceptualised as a property crime committed against a woman's male kin rather than as a crime committed against the woman herself was both true and timely. This is why marital rape – the abuse of a husband's 'property' – was only relatively recently criminalised in the West, and it remains legal in many non-Western countries. The fight for its criminalisation has been one of the great feminist campaigning efforts of the last century and has not yet been fully won. *Against Our Will* helped to galvanise that effort in the 1970s and 1980s, which was a very fine achievement. For that alone, the book merits praise.

Brownmiller's argument is summed up in a famous quote from *Against Our Will*, in which she describes rape as 'nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.'⁴ Brownmiller's model understands rape as an expression of political, as well as physical, dominance. Thus she suggests that the vast over-representation of men among perpetrators of rape is a product not of biology but, rather, of patriarchy: a social system which privileges male interests over female ones. According to this view, rapists are not born but made – they are the products of a culture that encourages men to see women as their sexual playthings. And so, to end rape, we must first end patriarchy.

Over the last fifty years, this argument has remained influential among feminists of every ideological persuasion.

For instance Jill Filipovic, writing in *The Guardian* in 2013, expresses a mainstream feminist idea when she insists that rape is 'about both power and violence. Rapists use sex organs as the locus of their violence, but rape isn't about sex, at least not in the sense of being motivated by sexual attraction or an uncontrollable sexual urge.'⁵ This sentiment is often expressed in one, succinct phrase: 'rape is about power, not sex.'

I often repeated this view as a rape crisis worker – in fact, I probably used the exact phrase. I felt that to say otherwise – to suggest that rapists are motivated by sexual desire, not just a desire for control – would be to excuse them, which of course I didn't want to do, given that I was daily witnessing the terrible and lasting harm done by rape. Plus there really is some truth to the claim – workplace sexual harassment, for instance, is almost never perpetrated by junior men against more senior women. Instead it follows a predictable gradient: perpetrated by those with more power against those with less.

But I realise now that I wanted to believe that power was the whole story in large part because I found the alternative hypothesis too depressing for words. In a new preface to *Against Our Will*, written in 2013, Brownmiller (ungenerously) represented this alternative:

Some evolutionary biologists believe quite strongly in the grim inevitability of 'men will be men.' A vocal handful of neo-Darwinians theorize that rape is a cost-effective strategy for males (embedded with drives for aggression, promiscuity, and reproduction) to spread their genes widely with a minimal amount of parental investment. What a fancy argument for rape, and for the failure to pay child support, as natural behavior!⁶

If we think that rape is 'natural behaviour' then we must – according to Brownmiller's view here – also think of it as, firstly, permissible and, secondly, inevitable. This first claim is a

textbook example of the naturalistic fallacy: the false belief that because something is natural it must necessarily be good. But the second claim is more difficult. If rape is indeed a product of evolution, does that make it inevitable? Well, not necessarily, but it certainly does make it more difficult to eradicate, which is, I think, a key reason for the historical reluctance of feminists to accept the scientific argument that Brownmiller is so contemptuous of. Instead, most feminists continue to favour socialisation theory as the preferred way of explaining male and female behaviour, both good and bad. This theory is popular among liberal feminists, whom I discussed at length in the last chapter, but it is also popular among the other key group of feminists still active in the twenty-first century: radical feminists, generally defined as those feminists who call for the radical restructuring of a society understood to be male supremacist.

Socialisation theory insists that there are no innate psychological differences between men and women, and that any differences we observe must be the product of nurture, not nature. There is some evidence in support of this theory. In her bestselling book *Delusions of Gender*, the Australian academic and author Cordelia Fine outlines the long history of researchers' attempts to find definitive proof for innate differences, concluding that the case for socialisation theory is ultimately much stronger. She makes clear that there is plenty of evidence that males and females experience very different treatment throughout their lifetimes. For instance, in one typical study described by Fine:

Mothers were shown an adjustable sloping walkway, and asked to estimate the steepness of slope their crawling eleven-month-old child could manage and would attempt. Girls and boys differed in neither crawling ability nor risk taking when it came to testing them on the walkway. But mothers underestimated girls and over-estimated boys – both in crawling ability and

crawling attempts – meaning that in the real world they might often wrongly think their daughters incapable of performing or attempting some motor feats, and equally erroneously think their sons capable of others.⁷

These differences in socialisation start from the moment a child is born, and we don't know exactly how much of an effect they have long term. However, it seems likely that they do have *some* effect and that the observed psychological differences between the sexes are therefore at least partially attributable to childhood socialisation. Thus feminism in the post-second-wave era has often paid close attention to childrearing, for instance objecting to toys or advertising that promote gender stereotypes.

At the heart of this resocialisation project is a fundamentally utopian idea: if the differences we see between the sexes are entirely socialised, then they must also be entirely curable through cultural reform, which means that, if all of us, right now, could accept the feminist truth and start raising our children differently, then within a generation we could remake the world.

It's a nice idea, and I used to sincerely believe in it. But the evidence put forward by the authors of *A Natural History of Rape*, as well as many other scientists, forces us to reckon with a possibility that is a lot less appealing: what if it's not that easy? What if hierarchy, and viciousness, and violence are baked in? What if the feminist task is much, much harder than we've previously acknowledged?

Human animals

Brownmiller writes in *Against Our Will* that 'no zoologist, as far as I know, has ever observed that animals rape in their natural habitat, the wild.'⁸ This statement is wrong – egregiously