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## **Sexual Freedom and Violence in the Neoliberal Capitalist System**

### **Introduction**

Heterogeneity of purpose usually indicates an undesired outcome given certain logical premises that should have led to another conclusion. Something similar seems to have happened with the sexual revolution, having theorized that the liberation of the bonds of the monogamous, patriarchal structure would give rise to a construction of the self without the previous heavy biological and cultural ties. However, by freeing themselves from biological ties and cultural conditions, postmodern subjects have settled upon individualism and narcissism, opening the door to a continuous, incessant construction of themselves. Moreover, sexuality has been integrated into the capitalist production system and has been turned into an object of consumption. This has led to new forms of violence associated with sexuality, giving rise to new injustices instead of a more equitable sexual order. Thus, overcoming the monogamous

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order associated with a somewhat religious structure of the world by a limitless pansexuality has led to the creation of a ruthless competition with clear winners and losers, a social order founded on the violence of the strongest (in this case, those with the most sexual capital), that is, the umpteenth failed promise of revolution. In explaining this phenomenon, we will first explore the process of sexual freedom as a new construct of the self that opens the way to the postmodern subject and to a split of the body from biology. We then discuss the relationship between this process and the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism and the logic of power (section 3) that defines the emergence of a performance society oriented toward social control (section 4). Finally, in the last section, the proposed schema will be applied to explain the unexpected effects of the overcoming of a monogamous society with the return to a polygynous structure that leaves an increasing number of people outside the sexual market. In particular, we will address this issue through religiosity and the secularization of the Western world's long-established Christian values.

### **Sexual freedom and the construction of the self**

The sexual revolution that took place in the mid-twentieth century had as its primary objective the liberation of sexuality, which was considered repressed by the patriarchal morals. For radical feminism, the patriarchy had limited sexuality to the expression of a stable bond—monogamous marriage—that was justified by the possibility of motherhood. Under the influence of the Frankfurt School and, in particular, Reich and Marcuse,<sup>1</sup> the sexual revolution attempted to redefine sexuality as an instrument for the expression of desire: not only sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Reich, *The sexual revolution: toward a self-regulating character structure* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); cf. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and civilization*

desire, but also the desire about one's own identity, which can be constructed through sexuality.

In this regard, it could be said that there is a tradition that, since Plato, has identified eros "with love, [with] the desire for the other"<sup>2</sup> and that the sexual revolution:

implied a change in the semantic, ethical and ontological meaning of eros and what is understood by love transformed into pure, instinctive pleasure. The altruism of eros was replaced by the egoism of narcissism and virtue by the pleasure principle, which governs the society of hedonism, which we still experience in our Western society [...]. Following the change in semantic meaning, eros became an expansive eroticism, a narcissism identified with the search for bodily satisfaction at any price and at any time, with the absolute disconnection of sex and procreation.<sup>3</sup>

This exaltation of eroticism coupled with narcissism is a quality that many contemporary critics have pointed out as one of the most characteristic features of the postmodern individual.<sup>4</sup> In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch identified the origin of postmodern narcissism in the fall of great thought systems (such as religions, national discourses, or strong ideologies). The loss of the great discourses that

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(London and New York: Routledge, 2012); *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Jesús Trillo-Figueroa, *Una revolución silenciosa. La política sexual del feminismo socialista* (Madrid: Libros libres, 2007), 16. The translations of the quotations from works that have not been published in English are the authors' own.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its discontents* (New York: Polity Press, 1997); cf. Gilles Lipovetsky 2000, *La era del vacío* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2000); cf. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton & Company, 1991); cf. Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *The Tyranny of Pleasure* (New York: Algora publishing, 1999).

argue that there is a reality that goes beyond individuality means that the person “gives no thought to anything beyond their immediate needs,”<sup>5</sup> which, in turn, makes it impossible for the individual to “subordinate his needs and interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself.”<sup>6</sup> The love of surrendering oneself, which implies the renunciation of oneself for the good of another, is understood as something:

Intolerably oppressive, offensive to common sense and injurious to personal health and well-being. To liberate humanity from such outmoded ideas of love and duty has become the mission of the post-Freudian therapies and particularly of their converts and popularizers, for whom mental health means the overthrowing of inhibitions and the immediate gratification of every impulse.<sup>7</sup>

This would be the postmodern sexual ideal: that of a sexuality freed from the limitations of the body and the need for commitment. The paradigm shift is especially radical in women, since the possibility of motherhood conditions their sexual life, both with regard to their bodies, as well as the need for a commitment to guarantee the care of the offspring by the man. Freed from both, sexuality becomes a sensation-seeking instrument. The Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, who famously called our time liquid modernity, argues, in *Postmodernity and its discontents*, that, in liberated sexuality:

Nothing follows from the sexual encounter, apart from sex itself and the sensations which accompany the encounter; sex, one may say, left the family home for the street, where only accidental passers-by meet who

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<sup>5</sup> Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

–while meeting– know that sooner or later (sooner rather than later) their ways are bound to part again.<sup>8</sup>

The dynamics of casual sex reveals the deep individualism of the postmodern subject, who takes the sexual encounter less seriously because of the fear of failure of commitment. In this regard, Lasch argues that postmodern culture “advises people not to make too large an investment in love and friendship, to avoid excessive dependence on others, and to live for the moment.”<sup>9</sup> It could be said that this is the consequence, on the level of sexuality, of that fear of others which was the motivation of the modern social contract. The fear of a social life no longer governed by natural law makes commitment impossible and atomizes the individual. Despite this, Lipovetsky argues that the post-modern subject does not renounce sexuality, but changes its meaning from being the expression of total surrender to another to being an instrument of the affirmation of individuality:

For many of us, love remains the most desirable experience, the one that best represents “true life.” The facts are there: the commercialization of ways of life in no way entails the disqualification of affective, selfless values. Far from being antiquated, the valuing of love is the analogue of the culture of individual autonomy, which rejects collective prescriptions that deny the right to the personal pursuit of happiness. With the individualizing dynamic, everyone wants to be recognized, valued, preferred to others, desired for themselves and not compared to anonymous, “interchangeable” beings. If we assign so much value to love, it is, among other things, because it responds to the narcissistic needs of individuals to value themselves as unique people.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 147.

<sup>9</sup> Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *La sociedad de la decepción* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2008), 38.

Individualistic sexuality, freed from biology and, consequently, from commitment, has been termed pansexuality.<sup>11</sup> For some authors, its foundations entail the overcoming of not only sexuality, but of humanity itself. In this regard, sexual freedom would be an instrument within a larger movement of the deconstruction and reconstruction of the human, the so-called transhumanism or posthumanism. The liberated sexuality will be “optional, reversible, multiple.”<sup>12</sup> The sexual fluidity that gender feminism had theorized will be the norm, because if sexuality is based on desire, it cannot but change when desire changes, such that “all sexual identity will be nothing more than an instance in transition, a moment of change governed by desire, the *voluptas-voluntas*.”<sup>13</sup> However, Segovia argues that the destruction of sexual morality through revolution implies its replacement by the new pansexual morality, which seeks to become a social norm:

If at first sexual freedom could be understood as a venture of the body and desires beyond the constraints of reason [...], against society, against morality and even against one’s own conscience, the pansexualism that we are now experiencing is so with the surety of reasoning: the posthuman subject needs to justify themselves—if one could say so—in their radical desire consummated in an unrestrained sexuality, which leads them to affirm the morality of all sexual relations [...], its conversion into a social norm [...], with the endorsement of their conscience that

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Alberto Matamoros, “Amor líquido de Zygmunt Bauman. De los amores líquidos.” *Cuaderno de Materiales* 23 (2005); Cf. Ana Elisa Sandoval Calle, *La licuefacción de la sexualidad: una aproximación a la pansexualidad en la modernidad líquida* (Quito: Puce, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Juan Fernando Segovia, “La progresiva destrucción de la naturaleza y la naturaleza humana.” In *¿Transhumanismo o posthumanidad? La política y el derecho después del humanismo*, ed. Miguel Ayuso (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2019), 69.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 69.

reproaches nothing and approves everything. Pansexuality is thus offered as the way to emancipate oneself from sexuality itself.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, liberation would not involve the restoration of a sexuality that has been instrumentalized by the patriarchal power system and that must be recovered, but in the construction of a new sexual paradigm for a new humanity. This sexuality constructed by the will is what Segovia calls metasex, “which not only questions the dictatorships of anatomical, genital and binary sex, but also the limits of the species and intimacy [...]. Metasex is an open, plenary sexuality governed by the will.”<sup>15</sup> The immediate goal of metasex would be the satisfaction of desire and the pursuit of pleasure by overcoming the limits imposed by culture or the body. In the same sense, Guillebaud argues that the idea of the sexual revolution “flowed from an acknowledged ambition: to sweep away the past and to promote ‘a man of pleasure,’ like the New Man proclaimed in political revolutions. A man freed from rules and from prudence, dedicated only to infinite pleasure.”<sup>16</sup>

However, the aim of pleasure is subject to “sociobiological constraints,”<sup>17</sup> which can and must be overcome through technology:

There is a growing trend towards the use of technologies that promise to help us gain autonomy over our bodies, particularly in sexual matters. The use of technological neuro-enhancers could turn man into a sexual robot (sexbot) capable of satisfying all his desires and increasing his pleasure without inhibitions due to the disappearance of moral (adultery, paedophilia) or legal (monogamy, rape) controls and remorse, including psychological barriers (guilt, repression).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Segovia, “La progresiva,” 69.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> Guillebaud, *The Tyranny of Pleasure*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Segovia, “La progresiva,” 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

In this way, sexuality would be totally emancipated, even from the body, since the sexual relationship could be “transferred or directed by cybernetic impulses. [It would be] the promise of a disease-free sex and also a pre-announcement of the disappearance of the human race.”<sup>19</sup> The sexual-technological revolution would consequently be the instrument for the construction of a new man, a neoman, which Segovia calls posthuman:

We live in the age of the posthuman [...], of the posthuman sexual subject imitating machines. The body of the machine is a hybrid, equipped for all kinds of transsexual relations; that body should serve as a model for the posthuman subject open to transsexuality and pansexuality.<sup>20</sup>

The consolidation of the pansexual model depends, to a large extent, on its integration into the contemporary capitalist dynamic. The synergy between sexual freedom and neoliberal capitalism is possible because the sexual freedom of society shares in its symbolic imaginary the same ideals as contemporary capitalism: freedom, self-realisation, empowerment, and creativity.<sup>21</sup> Thus, liberated sexuality is easily integrated as an object of consumption, giving rise to the appearance of new forms of sexual violence, which can only be understood in the context of neoliberal capitalism.

The hypothesis that sexuality becomes an object of consumption forces us to address two previous issues: firstly, it is necessary to define what is understood by capitalism in the historical context following the sexual revolution. Secondly, it is worth asking whether sexuality is the only attribute of the human being that has materialized and

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<sup>19</sup> Segovia, “La progresiva,” 69–70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>21</sup> Dana Kaplan & Eva Illouz, *What Is Sexual Capital?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 93.



has been integrated by the consumption system or whether it is a process that affects the person as such.

### **Capitalism and the materialization of reality**

Addressing capitalism is always a complex task for several reasons. Firstly, because it is an unfinished reality that is still developing. The distance in time with respect to phenomena whose beginning and end are clear facilitates its analysis. This is not the case with capitalism and it is aggravated by the fact that capitalism is a reality made up of multiple contradictory phenomena that are constantly changing. Consequently, definitions of capitalism may seem incomplete or doomed to becoming obsolete.

However, it has also been said that today's capitalism in its neoliberal form would be a "theory of everything, the human and social everything."<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, it could be understood that capitalism is always the same, although its immanent form may vary between one thing and even its opposite. This definition opens up a promising perspective of analysis: the study of capitalism would consist of determining the common essence of its contingent manifestations and the constant truth that underlies all the opposing expressions of it.

This proposal of study implies transcending the merely economic perspective and considering capitalism apart from philosophy, apart from the realm of the person. In this regard, capitalism would be a decline of the person, since it allows the possibility of life in metaphysical conditions most opposite to the person.

The essence of capitalism is to be materialism, "a materialist metaphysics that strives for infinite capital,"<sup>23</sup> since it has an innate, unstop-

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<sup>22</sup> Luciano Gallino, *Finanzcapitalismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), 27.

<sup>23</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Capitalism and the Death Drive* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 12.

pable inertia to reduce all reality, including the person themselves, to mere matter—quantifiable, malleable, profitable. It is because of this inertia that capitalism is capable of converting *esse* into *res* and allows the buying and selling of the being as being.

The materializing dynamic of capitalism is reflected in its very own historical evolution, which shows that it has been integrating increasingly more transcendent realms of reality. Thus, in its origin, capitalism was seen as a management system for physical goods (such as gold or oil) and, later, for human activity (work). But, in its latest incarnation, capitalism has become a system of management and commercialization of the being itself, of the person's soul, which is reduced to matter to be bought and sold on the market.

The materialization of reality thus reaches its absolute perfection by making possible the contradiction: the most immaterial and the highest of human reality is reduced to an object of consumption. Thus, it is understood that capitalism is a theory of everything, since “there can only be one capitalism,” which is the “logic of capital and its accumulation”<sup>24</sup> to which all reality is subjected. The materializing dynamic can also be observed from the dichotomy of the social and the individual. In this sense, it can be said that there has been a process of immanentization, whereby the social and the political have materialized first, and then the individual. The materialization of the social begins with Marx, who executes a paradigm shift regarding the concept of power. Marx maintains that “the anatomy of [...] civic society is to be sought in political economy”<sup>25</sup> and, in doing so, reduces the social and the political to the economic.

For Foucault, in this materialization of the political, the State assumes mercantile truth as a form of government:

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<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 164.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904), 11.

Inasmuch as it enables production, need, supply, demand, value, and price, etcetera, to be linked together through exchange, the market constitutes a site of veridiction, I mean a site of verification-falsification for governmental practice. [...] The market now means that to be a good government, a government has to function according to truth. [...] The market must tell the truth (*dire le vrai*); it must tell the truth in relation to governmental practice.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the power of the State is transformed to guaranteeing the exchange and sale of everything. Politics materializes as it lowers its sight on the transcendent human and focuses on the management of mere things, of merchandise, thus certifying the death of politics. The materialization of politics implies its end and a profit for capital, which becomes the holder of the power previously held by leaders.

It could be thought that the domination of capital demonstrates the failure of the modern State as a system of control, as the holder of the monopoly of legitimate violence.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, Byung-Chul Han understands that the consolidation of capitalism implies the culmination of the power process itself that gave rise to the modern State. Han defines this process as the “emancipation from a transcendent order”<sup>28</sup> which begins with the modern State and in which capital ends up establishing itself in a “new kind of transcendence, which entails a new form of subjectivation.”<sup>29</sup> According to Han, this implies that “politics lapses into servitude again. It becomes the handmaiden of Capital.”<sup>30</sup> The contractarian tradition founds the modern State on the denial of

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<sup>26</sup> Foucault, *The Birth*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 54.

<sup>28</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics* (London: Verso, 2017), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

transcendence by imposing a new transcendence: the power of the State, the mortal god, which constructs and limits human reality.<sup>31</sup> According to Han's opinion, this same mechanism for substituting one transcendence for another would also operate with respect to the modern State and capital: "Could it be that Capital is a new God?"<sup>32</sup> he asks himself. In this regard, the death of the State would imply that it has fully fulfilled its own power dynamic.

Furthermore, the power of large concentrations of capital reaches a magnitude that politics could never dream of, since it acquires the capacity to spread into all spheres of reality and incorporate them into the market dynamic.

We have said that there is an immanentization of the process of capitalist materialization, whereby capitalism has phagocytized the political-social first, and then the individual. This can be appreciated in the Marxist theories on work<sup>33</sup> but is most evident with the materialization of freedom and sexuality that comes with the sexual revolution of the mid-twentieth century.

## **Sexuality as an object of consumption**

In *The Tyranny of Pleasure*, Guillebaud forcefully states that "for thirty years, the disintegration of sexuality, identity and community that has accompanied the revolution of morals hasn't caused the 'capitalists' to lose any sleep or money to lose its dominion."<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein, Byung-Chul Han argues that today's society is defined by a

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), 132.

<sup>32</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 77.

<sup>34</sup> Guillebaud, *The Tyranny of Pleasure*, 83.

dynamic in which “Capital exploits individual freedom.”<sup>35</sup> This is due, as has been seen, to the fact that neoliberalism is a theory of everything, which gradually engulfs human reality, subjecting it to the logic of the market. In this way, it has managed to integrate as part of the capitalist system something that emerged as its antithesis.

In *What Is Sexual Capital?*, Kaplan & Illouz argue that the sexual revolution has turned sexuality into “a personal attribute, an identity, and hence a property of the person,”<sup>36</sup> which they call sexual capital: “sexual freedom was incorporated into economic and social fields and morphed into a kind of capital—an unevenly distributed resource that yielded various types of advantages in different socio-historical circumstances.”<sup>37</sup> This thesis had already been proposed by Bauman in *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, published in 1997, in which, analysing the sexual revolution, he argues that:

Contrary to the popular beliefs instilled by the way in which this change is presented and discussed, this undoubtedly profound transformation is in no way tantamount to ‘sexual emancipation’—to the liberation of sexual activity from the attached social functions which constrained, with often harmful results, the libidinal impulse. It augurs rather a successive ‘redeployment’ of sex in the service of a new pattern of social integration and reproduction. As before, sex ‘has a function’; as before, it is ‘instrumental’; only the function has changed, as well as the nature of the process in which the redeployed sex plays its instrumental role.<sup>38</sup>

It could be said that the process of sexual liberation, seeking to emancipate sexuality from the patriarchal system, has ended up relo-

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<sup>35</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Kaplan & Illouz, *What Is Sexual Capital?*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 146.

cating it within the capitalist system by turning it into a market product. Bauman insists that “the cutting off of sex [...] from marital and parental relations, is a powerful instrument, not just the consequence, of the processes of privatization and marketization.”<sup>39</sup> From this it can be deduced that capitalism has integrated the revolutionary spirit within itself, which would confirm that, although it is true that the sexual revolution pursued the seizure of power,<sup>40</sup> it is also true that power allowed itself to be seized by the revolution as a mechanism for the survival and to strengthen the system. In relation to this and as an example of this dynamic, it would be interesting to know Bauman’s explanation of how the sexual revolution reinterprets patriarchal institutions and categories and ends up integrating them into the capitalist system. Such is the case of engagement, which is separated from the marital relationship, but is modernized in other ways:

Today individuals are ‘socially engaged’ primarily through their role as consumers, not producers; the arousing of new desires replaces normative regulation, publicity takes the place of coercion, and seduction makes redundant or invisible the pressures of necessity.<sup>41</sup>

All this can be interpreted in the context of the performance society, which Byung-Chul Han proposes as a result of neoliberal dynamics. For the South Korean philosopher, “Neoliberalism represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom. Everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty [...] comes to be exploited,”<sup>42</sup> including sexuality. Thus, the system is

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<sup>39</sup> Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 147.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 147–8.

<sup>42</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 3.

strengthened because “only when freedom is exploited are returns maximized.”<sup>43</sup> The integration of sexual freedom within the capitalist system is based on a mechanism that Han explains in the following terms:

Capital grows inasmuch as people engage in free competition. Hereby, individual freedom amounts to servitude inasmuch as Capital lays hold of it and uses it for its own propagation. That is, Capital exploits individual freedom in order to breed: ‘It is not the individuals who are set free by free competition; it is, rather, capital which is set free.’<sup>44</sup>

According to Han, the capitalism that Marx fought against is inevitable: the confrontation between capital and the proletariat cannot be overcome through revolution. Capitalism, for Han, has a permanent character, according to which “industrial capitalism has now mutated into neoliberalism and financial capitalism, which are implementing a post-industrial, immaterial mode of production.”<sup>45</sup> What is unique to this post-industrial system is that it “transforms workers into entrepreneurs.”<sup>46</sup> Han understands that it is precisely neoliberalism and not communist revolution that is now abolishing the *auto-exploited* working class; instead, neoliberalism is in the course of doing so. Today, everyone is an auto-exploiting the laborer in his or her own enterprise. People are now master and slave in one.<sup>47</sup>

The immanentization of power discussed above and the surrender of everything to economic efficiency is evident here: it is no longer power that directly exercises economic violence upon people; instead this capacity for control is transmitted to each individual, which allows

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<sup>43</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

a greater efficiency of the exploitation system. Consequently, the post-modern subject is, in Han's view, an:

‘entrepreneur of himself’ [that] engages in auto-exploitation willingly—and even passionately. The self-as-a-work-of-art amounts to a beautiful but deceptive illusion that the neoliberal regime maintains in order to exhaust its resources entirely. Under neoliberalism, the technology of power takes on a subtle form. It does not lay hold of individuals directly. Instead, it ensures that individuals act on themselves so that power relations are interiorized—and then interpreted as freedom. Self-optimization and submission, freedom and exploitation, fall into one.<sup>48</sup>

In line with this, the exercise of freedom in the neoliberal capitalist system not only does not exclude, but rather demonstrates the existence of absolute control by the power system, which allows the immanentization of violence to be more effective. This violence is exercised through what Han calls the “dictatorship of transparency”<sup>49</sup> that is generated by the expansion of the digital world. He understands that, through technology, control can cover a greater number of areas of reality. Furthermore, it is more effective because each person, freely and constantly, feeds the control machinery by ceding their privacy. Therefore, according to Han, once again:

unbounded freedom and communication are switching over into total control and surveillance [...]. We had just freed ourselves from the disciplinary panopticon—then we threw ourselves into a new, and even more efficient, panopticon [...]. The occupants of today's digital panopticon [...] collaborate in the digital panopticon's operations. Digital control society makes intensive use of freedom. This can only occur thanks

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<sup>48</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



to voluntary self-illumination and self-exposure [...]. Digital Big Brother outsources operations to inmates, as it were.<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, to the extent that the subject of the performance society is isolated by their individualism and is, at the same time, the oppressor and the oppressed, the system is shielded because the revolution becomes impossible. This is how Cruz Ortiz De Landázuri understands it:

The revolution was only possible in Marx's scheme due to this contrast between the exploiter and the exploited. Faced with the exploitation of others, the union of proletarians arises to fight against their situation. In liberalism there is no such option because one exploits oneself: then one can only direct aggression towards oneself, but not in the form of violence, but in the form of depression.<sup>51</sup>

This is the perfection of the performance society as a system of social control: violence is executed from within so that there is no possibility of resistance. Therefore, in *The Burnout Society*, Han concludes that:

The society of laboring and achievement is not a free society. It generates new constraints. Ultimately, the dialectic of master and slave does not yield a society where everyone is free and capable of leisure, too. Rather, it leads to a society of work in which the master himself has become a laboring slave. In this society of compulsion, everyone carries a work camp inside.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 8–9.

<sup>51</sup> Manuel Cruz Ortiz de Landázuri, “De la biopolítica a la psicopolítica en el pensamiento social de Byung-Chul Han.” *Athenea digital* 17, no. 1 (2017): 199.

<sup>52</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 19.

From this premise, Kaplan and Illouz interpret sexual freedom as an essential element to strengthen today's capitalism: "Notions such as sexual diversity and empowerment only help mask capital's interests."<sup>53</sup> The transformation of sexual freedom into sexual capital would imply the culmination of the modern process by which power –previously the State, now capital– engulfs individual freedom to feed the power system itself:

The concept of sexual capital becomes useful precisely because it simultaneously acknowledges the (perceived) possibility for sexual freedom and the fact that, "as neoliberal rationality becomes our ubiquitous common sense," [...] individual liberty not only has become compatible with market freedom but is actually an extension of it.<sup>54</sup>

It is in this sense that it can be said that the sexual revolution's seizure of power was not unidirectional, as power also seized sexual freedom for its own benefit. Ultimately, sexual freedom has transformed the person into an object of consumption. Sexual capital materializes the materialist assumptions that augured the sexual revolution because it has consolidated a system of exchange of the self, which reaches the material and even the spiritual.

### **The new forms of sexual violence**

The sexual revolution has accentuated the market nature of sexuality. The Marxist critique of marriage and more generally of the family, which advocates overcoming monogamy as a factor of reproduction of

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<sup>53</sup> Kaplan & Illouz, *What Is Sexual Capital?*, 13.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–5.

class oppression, was not only wrong when considering the capitalist genesis of the monogamous family in terms of the transmission of property to children and the security of parenthood; it also failed to understand the purpose of monogamy. The latest developments in capital have succeeded in introjecting the question of class oppression, this time directly with one's normativized body, and dynamiting, in pursuit of sexual freedom, the monogamous foundations of society that Marx found in its relationship with the sacred and with the "holy family." In reality, monogamy is not just an alienated reflection of an "intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis"<sup>55</sup> but, as the sexual revolution has recently revealed, the flood gate of an entire civilization. Indeed, even considering monogamy as a cultural structure (leaving aside metaphysical and strictly moral issues), it has marked an enormous improvement in the history of humanity. It should be noted that the demolition of the monogamous structure has not led to a better distribution of the sexual market, but a regression to a state of pre-civilization that has destroyed the subtle divide between culture and nature.<sup>56</sup> Thus, a new sexual order has emerged, founded, on the one hand, on female hypergamy and, on the other, on the exclusion of a growing portion of males from the sex market. The unregulated intra-sexual competition has given life to a new primitivism supported by technology in which Darwinian selection for mating has led to a new polygyny in which only a few high-status males are invited to the party of sexual freedom. Research published in 2012 shows that:

the norms and institutions that compose the modern package of monogamous marriage have been favoured by cultural evolution because of

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<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 570.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Imelda Chłodna-Błach, *From Paideia to High Culture* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020).

their group-beneficial effects—promoting success in inter-group competition.<sup>57</sup>

The monogamous structure, far from being a mere economic structure of oppression, reduces the competition between peers that, in women, occurs in order to mate with high-status males, while, among men, occurs in order to simply to mate with the greatest number of women. The evidence found in African polygynous groups sheds new light on the mechanisms of the non-monogamous society that has come into being following the sexual revolution:

In suppressing intrasexual competition and reducing the size of the pool of unmarried men, normative monogamy reduces crime rates, including rape, murder, assault, robbery and fraud, as well as decreasing personal abuse.<sup>58</sup>

At the same time, a monogamous structure of society increases the commitment to parenthood, substantially increases GDP and even increases democratic rights and civil liberties, and thus may explain the emergence of the notion of equality and human rights in the West.<sup>59</sup> It is clear that the regulation of the sexual market modifies the functioning of societies. A supposed non-regulation is also a regulation, although it does not take account of the consequences that this produces. The sexual revolution, instead of increasing equality in the sexual market, has taken society back to a state of pre-civilization, as the monogamous structure has proved to be the basis of civilization. The

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<sup>57</sup> Joseph Henrich, Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson. “The puzzle of monogamous marriage.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 367 (2012): 657.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 667.

liberalization of the sexual market, far from increasing the possibilities of mating, has led to the re-emergence of a structure that, with the excuse of bringing down a system of sexual injustice, has returned the world to ruthless competition and natural selection that is much more unfair than before. It is no coincidence that in this context the concept of sexual capital emerges to explain the ability to profit from sexual attractiveness in all areas of life. The sexual revolution is thus a revolution that could only take place in a capitalist environment, since it has applied the already active patterns of individualism and deregulation to generate profit for a few. Instead of opening the doors to a new world of sexual equality, it has taken us back to a Darwinian context.

In his first novel, Houellebecq, contemplating Raphaël's social and sexual defeat, states:

In our society, sex represents a second system of differentiation, with complete independence from money; and it behaves as a system of differentiation as implacable, at least, as money. On the other hand, the effects of both systems are strictly equivalent. Just like unbridled economic liberalism, and for analogous reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of absolute impoverishment.<sup>60</sup>

The market is never a zero-sum game and there are winners and losers who are chosen by the fiercest of natural selection centered on attractiveness and wealth. The phenomenon of incels (involuntary celibates) can be understood from the logic of capital applied to sexuality. In this regard, these are the losers of the sexual revolution, having been left out of the market due to their low value in it. The trivialization of sex does not lead to its wider distribution, but to its concentration in an

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<sup>60</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Ampliación del campo de batalla* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2019), 112.

ever smaller number of male users. In post-industrial societies with high technological development, the pattern is repeated with similar frequency: in the United States, where sexual activity has plummeted among young people under 30 in the last decade,<sup>61</sup> in Japan, where virginity among the same age group has soared<sup>62</sup> and in India and China where some 70 million men have been left out of the sexual market due to a lack of women.<sup>63</sup> Even with different motivations, the monogamous model is dying and in its place is emerging a new polygyny, similar in its order to the one we commented on above, but with an enormous capacity for diffusion thanks to technology and the capitalist logic that it embodies. Thus, sexual fluidity, promiscuity, and the separation of sex from reproduction are open doors for the introduction of neoliberal logic in the sexual arena. The entire modern framework of gender and the associated sexual freedom, far from representing a new form of social justice, has given rise to a social stratification that is practically impossible to climb up, as it is based on biological characteristics that the subject has no choice over and that the sexual market has made profitable. The sexual revolution is thus the triumph of capitalist logic applied to the sexual market.

It is worth asking whether the phenomenon we are witnessing can be explained by resorting to categories such as religiosity and secularization. In a traditional religious context, chastity is at the core of sexual capital and a woman's reputation rests on it. Kaplan and Illouz point out:

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<sup>61</sup> Christopher Ingraham, "The share of Americans not having sex has reached a record high". *The Washington Post*, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/03/29/share-americans-not-having-sex-has-reached-record-high>.

<sup>62</sup> William Pesek, "Japan's virginity crisis threatens credit rating". *Forbes*, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williampesek/2019/06/14/japans-virginity-crisis-threatens-credit-rating>.

<sup>63</sup> Simon Denyer & Annie Gowen, "Too many men". *The Washington Post*, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/too-many-men>.

For a full-fledged sexual capital to emerge, sexuality needs to autonomize itself vis-à-vis religion. What has enabled the formation of a sexual capital is the loosening of the norms and taboos that regulate sexuality, along with the increasing incorporation of sexuality into the economic field.<sup>64</sup>

Emancipation from religion has been the preliminary step to any kind of sexual revolution. Considering only the process of secularization of Western societies, the dissolution of Christian values has been the starting point for changing the sexual behavior of the masses. In this process of secularization, the values of capitalism have played a fundamental role, since they have managed to apply their logic to all areas of life, reducing everything to a commodity and assigning value only according to attractiveness. On the other hand, religious logic and especially Christian logic are based on gratuity and self-giving, thus being impossible to be integrated into a capitalist logic on pain of perishing and transmuting into a concept of limitless hedonistic freedom. The monogamous concept that comes from ancient Rome and is related to Christianity must be considered as something unique in the history of humanity, because it reconciles the need to regulate the sexual market with the inviolable dignity of women regardless of their fertility pattern, as demonstrated by the early emergence, already in the first century, of the female vocation to virginity.<sup>65</sup> The elevation to the order of grace of the natural reality of marriage, from an anthropological and philosophical point of view, came to sanction a reality that acquires all

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<sup>64</sup> Kaplan & Illouz, *What Is Sexual Capital?*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Letter To The Bishops Of The Catholic Church on The Collaboration Of Men And Women in The Church And In The World*, 2004, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040731\\_collaboration\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html).

its strength in the context of its dissolution. Monogamy is an order founded on justice in sharing the possibilities of mating; the action of grace heals what is impossible for nature to achieve, that is to say, the very natural end of the union between man and woman founded on procreation and raising of offspring. Furthermore, in the order of grace, this natural end becomes the oblation surrender of one spouse to the other. As Gilson<sup>66</sup> brilliantly observed, “nature constantly forgets that it owes the privilege of regaining its naturalness to the recreated work of grace, *opus recreationis*.” This intuition of the French philosopher assumes a new connotation in this context. The damaged, wounded nature manifests itself in the order of injustice founded on the intra-sexual competition that gives rise to a ferocious, exclusive sexual order. The salvation of nature is not an unconditional, denormatized surrender to its deviant impulses. A surrender to wounded nature is, as Spinoza<sup>67</sup> said, “the sovereign right to do everything that it can do,” an infinity of possibilities that coincide with the will of power to do everything possible. It would be an order founded on a Darwinian mechanism and a crushing eugenics in which only the genetic lottery and innate resources count, the most ruthless genetic selection based on force. For this reason, a formerly Christian and now deeply secularized society, in restoring the sexual order of pre-civilization, can only experience uprooting: the surrender of wounded nature to force causes disorientation and convulsions, as it cannot forget that it has lived in another cultural context in which the force of nature has been opposed by the force of *ius*. In short, following Gilson’s words, we must not forget that what we had called culture as if it were nature was rather the fruit of a unique grace of a unique civilization.

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<sup>66</sup> Étienne Gilson, *The Metamorphoses of the City of God* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 123.

<sup>67</sup> Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 195.





## Sexual Freedom and Violence in the Neoliberal Capitalist System

### SUMMARY

The sexual revolution of the 20th century was based on a redefinition of the body, which led to a new postmodern sexual ideal in which the body and sexuality were freed from the limitations of biology. This phenomenon was inserted within the logic of capitalism, which proposes itself as a “theory of everything,” that is to say, comprehensive of all human reality. Sexuality thus became an object of consumption, bowing to the logic of the capitalist system in which everything can be bought and sold. This new sexual market is based on sexual freedom, giving rise to a fierce competition between users that reaffirms narcissistic, individualistic patterns. In this sense, through the theory of sexual capital, the monogamous structure that existed prior to the sexual revolution and the new polyamorous structure of postmodernity are compared, with the conclusion that the sexual revolution has generated new forms of unforeseen sexual violence.

**Keywords:** sexual freedom, capitalism, violence, social control, sexual capital, monogamy

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