



INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE ON “BOYS’ SEXUALITY AND AGE OF CONSENT”

Adolescent sexuality has been at the forefront of the recent “Culture Wars,” as is clear from the many news stories and political battles over issues such as sex education, teen pregnancy and STDs, Child Sexual Abuse, enhanced legal regulation of sex offenders, pedophiles on the internet, “sexting” and child pornography. On the one hand adolescents today are more sexually mature than at most historical periods: physical puberty occurs ever earlier (Moller, 1987), while children’s capacity to access the same media as adults grows ever more sophisticated. Already in 1982, Neil Postman presciently observed that electronic media had obliterated the historical technological superiority of literate adults relative to not-yet-fully-literate children (Postman, 1982). At that point, he was thinking mainly of television, but his observation has become even more true in the digital age, when adolescents are often the ones teaching their parents and grandparents. 1982 had not yet grasped what would be the ubiquity of MTV or cheap, highly graphic visual pornography in many parents’ closets, or if not there, on their kids’ computer screens. Children have become the most clever at accessing media at precisely the time when popular media culture is more saturated with verbal, musical, and visual images of sexuality than ever before.

At the same time, adolescents today are less sexually mature than at most historical periods. Boys’ sexuality is regulated with a more onerous and confusing legal regime in the U.S. than at any point in history. Young men’s financial dependency on parental support tends to last well into their twenties, perpetuating patriarchal control over other aspects of their lives. As Miles Groth observed in the inaugural issue of this journal, “In early rural America, manhood began in the early teen years, but now for most males, boyhood extends through adolescence to a time when the individual can begin to support *himself* and usually only himself. Of course, he has been mature *sexually* for many years. Ongoing infantilization of adolescent and young males is standard practice” (Groth, 2007, p. 18 n. 26). At few points in human history has the discrepancy between biological maturity and social maturity been as wide: our culture diffuses the myth that “manhood” is defined by sexual success, for which most 14-year olds can vie, while withholding the real “manhood” that comes with manly self-sufficiency and responsibility. Adolescent boys are tantalized with the fruits of manhood, ubiquitously advertised in

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the omnipresent popular media, while at the same time being denied them by the legal, therapeutic, and social regimes that surround them. The psychological and sociological consequences of this dangerous series of incompatibilities have not been explored as fully as they should.

Adults' exclusive hold on sexual privilege is today maintained through a pervasive ideology of childhood innocence, an amalgam of late Victorian sentimentalization (see Kincaid, 1992, who shows that this tradition was far from universal even in the 19th century) and progressive education in the tradition of Rousseau, who thought he could liberate children from the imprint of Original Sin by protecting them from adult corruption. By fetishizing the purity and inviolability of their children, parents not only perpetuate their own exclusive control of young bodies upon whom they practice surveillance with voyeuristic and quasi-incestuous glee (see Janssen in this issue), but they counterproductively construct the very threat their imagination most dreads, inasmuch as the never accessible child becomes the *pièce de résistance* of the sexual pervert's most lurid fancies, a process that Foucault called "perverse implantation" (see also Mohr, 2004).

Boys' sexuality is clearly a field ripe for interdisciplinary dialogue. At an international conference on the topic, "Good Sex, Bad Sex: Sex Law, Crime and Ethics," that took place in Budapest, Hungary, during May 2009, I organized a group of six speakers to address the issue of children's capacity to "consent" to sexual intimacy and how it should be legally regulated. The six articles in this special issue are based on the papers that were originally delivered at that conference. In various ways, all six papers touch on the most difficult problem associated with a libertarian stance on child sexuality, namely the issue of adult-child sex, which the hegemonic discourses of contemporary jurisprudence, political policy, clinical practice, and academic theory all assume to be uniquely and invariably damaging to the young in virtue of a structural power inequality between adults and children. A minority strand of opinion has suggested that this hegemonic discourse of all human relations as exercises of power is itself the most brutal exercise of power, by claiming for itself a mandate to "protect" the weak by controlling them for their own good (Kincaid, 1992, pp. 28-29).

The six contributors each represent a unique and important perspective on the question. Dr. Helmut Graupner of Vienna is a prominent European human rights attorney and President of Rechtskommittee Lambda, the leading Austrian organization promoting gay rights. His paper, "Sexual Consent and Human Rights," surveys the most recent rulings of the European Court of Human Rights on the issue of children's sexual rights. He argues eloquently that adolescents deserve both autonomy in sexual self-determination and legal protection from unwanted sexuality, and that the law can provide both.

Rev. Donald H. Mader is Assistant Pastor at the Pauluskerk in Rotterdam, where he has led the church's outreach ministry for sexual minorities, and is also completing his doctorate in Gay Studies at the University of Amsterdam. His contribution, "'The Individual Can ...': Objectifying Consent," proposes application to children of an objective test originally developed for the cognitively impaired, that ascertains both sexual knowledge and social skills in self-assertion of one's own

preferences. Such objective measures, coupled with effective and thorough sex education, could provide a better assessment of a young person's capacity to manage his or her autonomy than the blanket assumption that all children below a certain arbitrary age are incapable of "informed consent."

Dr. Bruce L. Rind is a prominent American social psychologist whose definitive 1998 meta-analysis of previous studies concerning adult-child sexual contacts undermined conventional assumptions of pervasive negative psychological effects. So unacceptable was this message to the political establishment in the U.S. that both houses of Congress by overwhelming margins voted to condemn his study, a move unprecedented in the history of American scholarship (see Rind, 2006). His careful and reasoned article, "Social Response to Age-Gap Sex Involving Minors: Empirical, Historical, Cross-Cultural, and Cross-Species Considerations," argues for a multi-disciplinary approach to the issue, which in his view demonstrates the social constructedness and historical contingency of prevalent modern assumptions about the harmfulness of such relations, particularly for adolescent boys.

My own background is as an American scholar of ancient Greek literature and social history. In "Sexual Consent and the Adolescent Male, or What Can We Learn from the Greeks?," I critically examine contemporary American legislative regimes governing adolescent sexuality within a historical perspective and test the universalizing assumptions of contemporary discourse against the evidence of a highly productive and successful social system that incorporated specific social functions for adolescent male sexuality. Modern legislation is shown to be premised on outmoded developmental theories and legal paradigms, rather than on sound social science or historical understanding. I argue that legal regimes created to protect or control girls' sexuality cannot be transferred to boys' sexuality without engendering great harm.

Dr. Richard Yuill is a sociologist whose research has focused on adult-child relationships. His contribution, "Interrogating the Essential: Moral Baselines on Adult-Child Sex," describes the resistance of specialist discourses to personal narratives that do not conform to the assumed victimological template. He moreover documents the forces of media sensationalism and political reaction that threaten and inhibit objective scientific discussions of this emotionally charged issue.

Finally, in a challenging essay, Diederik Janssen, a Dutch MD and theoretical anthropologist, draws on the insights of Jean Baudrillard and Queer Theory to suggest that contemporary anxieties over Child Sexual Abuse manifest a hyperextension of the Incest Taboo. He suggests that the empirical basis of the other essays in this issue fails to address the real need for a theoretical deconstruction of the post-modernist obsession with CSA as a defining foil to its most fundamental notions of kinship and sociality.

That every culture defines the distinction between "child" and "adult" realms differently should also remind us of the contingency and non-universality of our contemporary Western assumptions, which are applied with missionary imperialism to other places where they make no sense. Historical perspective makes us aware that no society, including our own, is static. What Bertha Mook (2007) in an earlier issue of this journal outlined as the "metabletics" of cultural systems must

provide a context for our consideration of social developments surrounding childhood, especially the continuous and dynamic renegotiation of all adult-child interactions. She faults the field of developmental psychology for insufficient attention to the social constructedness of its concepts. Any hope for positive change in the way our society treats its boys and their capacity for sexual self-realization (and self-control) must be embedded in a wider agenda of social reform, in conversation with a range of discourses on gender, sexual citizenship, and childhood in all its aspects. The present set of essays do not represent any consistent program of legal reform, much less advocacy of any particular sexuality, but an effort to further serious intellectual dialogue among the various academic and professional disciplines about how we can profit from each others' perspectives on the troubling, difficult, and often confusing subject of the sexual child and how we adults interact with it.

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