



The Case Against the Sexual Revolution: A New Guide to Sex in
the 21st Century

By Louise Perry

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Review by Michael Jensen

Louise Perry's book *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* is one of those books that is so sensible and yet at the same time so counter-intuitive that it is really surprising that it has not created more of a stir. Perry, certainly not a Christian (though showing some Christian awareness) and identifying strongly as a feminist and a campaigner against male sexual violence, courageously identifies why the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s has been bad news in many aspects, especially for women.

Yet she is not simply nostalgic for some halcyon domesticity of a bygone era. She recognises and appreciates many of what feminists would see as the gains of the second wave of feminism: more liberal divorce laws, greater awareness of domestic violence, legal equality in the workplace, and more.

Her challenge is more to the normalisation of sexual liberation that many other contemporary feminists wish women to embrace – a desire that goes back to at least Erica Jong's 1970s classic *The Fear of Flying*. The utopian vision of the sexual revolution was that, with the advent of contraception, women would finally be able to have 'zipless' (Jong's phrase) sex – just like men.

Perry's argument is that this dream is almost always deeply detrimental to women, and benefits only a minority of men. Her anthropological

contention, drawn from research data in the field of evolutionary psychology, is simply that men and women are different and experience sex and its consequences differently – something so obvious that only in the 21st century could it be seen as controversial! The notion of sex without ties, or ‘friends with benefits’, actually suits very few women – but suits some men very well. Encouraging young women to join in this sexual culture is in fact deeply damaging to them. Loveless sex does not empower women.

Perry further claims that there will always be a percentage of human males who will express a desire to rape – and given the chance, will enact this desire. This is a shocking and uncomfortable claim, but one which Perry says human cultures need to address with seriousness. Simply educating or changing social structures will not change this: the only effective response is using the full force of the law. Likewise, consent education, while not a bad thing in and of itself, is insufficient if it doesn’t actually accompany an idea of what sex is *for*. A simply recreational view of sex without relationship will do little to prevent young women from experiencing unwanted sex. Rather, we need a reform of our sexual assault laws, in Perry’s view, so that men clearly understand that they cannot simply do whatever they please to the bodies of women.

Perhaps most radical of all, Perry closes her book by arguing that marriage is actually, for the most part good – and in particular good for women, mostly. Of course, we should recognise that it has been abused as an institution and cast in terms of the ownership of wives by husbands. But, Perry says, the institution of marriage, functioning well, offers exactly the kind of companionship and protection that human beings need – especially those who wish to be mothers.

Perry is a journalist rather than a specialist in particular field of research and so I am conscious that her particular gift is making a case well rather than mucking about in the complexity of data first-hand. For this reason, though I found her work compelling, I reserve judgement somewhat. She has based her claims in what appears to be reputable research, and she is unafraid to say what the research says rather than simply say what fits the prevailing ideological narrative. However, I am interested to see how her

work will be received and what a more mainstream feminist reply might be to her arguments.

As a theologian, I am very much struck by the way in which Perry recognises the limits and possibilities for human beings of being a particular body. She is not naïve about 'choice', either: she knows that when human beings are given freedom, they are prone to abuse it and one another – and no amount of education will prevent that. Sometimes, we simply need to stop evil people from doing evil, no questions asked.

Dr Michael Jensen is the rector of St Mark's Darling Point in Sydney. Before that he lectured in theology and church history at Moore Theological College. He has published a number of books, including *Martyrdom and Identity: The Self on Trial* and *Is Forgiveness Really Free?* He co-hosts the podcast *With All Due Respect*.