

COUNTERING THE COUNTER-CULTURE I

THE MARIE ANTOINETTE EFFECT

The rich enjoy the pleasure of social change but it's the poor who suffer the consequences, observes **Theodore Dalrymple**

Social revolutions are long in the making and it is impossible to affix the precise date at which they began. The intellectual preparation of the near-destruction of the nuclear family in large parts of Western society since the 1960s was assiduous. Marx saw the family as an oppressive institution that had to be destroyed before humanity achieved its total liberation from oppression and became fully human (unlike, presumably, what it had been before). Like many a reformer and social revolutionary, however, Marx did not live his ideals: he was a good family man to the point of being a *pater familias*.

Recall Henrik Ibsen's famous play, *The Doll's House*. Such is Ibsen's dramatic skill that we fail to notice at the end of the play that the heroine, Nora, abandons her three children without a moment's hesitation or regret in the name of the pursuit of her own liberation. Ibsen held her up for our admiration and she has been taken as a heroine ever since, as if her three children imposed no moral obligation upon her.

Of course, we live in a society in which men are far more likely to abandon their children than women; and not every separation of parents leads to abandonment. But it cannot be regarded as altogether a cause for celebration that, say, a British child has, by the end of its childhood, about twice the chance of having a television in its bedroom as of having its biological father living at home—for many, television and the state are father to the child. And while the majority of stepfathers are no doubt good people, the fact remains that they are statistically many times more likely

than biological fathers to abuse children in their household, either physically or sexually, or both, and this is especially true in the lower reaches of society.

Most spectators of *The Doll's House* will fail to reflect on the prosperous nature of the household that Nora leaves, and that this mitigates to some extent the likely damage to her children. But as we know, the abandonment of children in our society is inversely proportional to their social class (and Australia is, like all other modern societies of any size, a class society). It's the rich who get the pleasure of social reform, for example of feeling warm inside at their own generosity of spirit, but it's the poor who get the deleterious consequences.

The same might be said of the spread of drugs through our societies. Those who are old enough may remember the propaganda in favour of the use of illicit drugs in the 1960s. You were enjoined to tune in, turn on and drop out. There was in all this a considerable admixture of what one might call the predominant ideology of our age, namely Marie-Antoinettism. Marie Antoinette,



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you may recall, dressed up as a shepherdess in order to live a bucolic idyll for a few hours, but always returned—in fact, never really left—her regal and aristocratic milieu. It was a form of moral exhibitionism that showed she was far in advance of her times, in a way a prophetess.

Once again, there had been a long preparation for the belief in the supposedly liberating effects of illicit drugs: ‘O just, subtle, and mighty opium’, wrote Thomas De Quincey in 1820. He turned his own efforts to abandon opium into a titanic struggle of the kind that would appeal to all self-aggrandising romanticists, for whom any titanic struggle was preferable to the humdrum workaday world of steady endeavour.

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Not a moment’s thought, not a fraction of a second’s, was given to the possible effect of widespread drug use on the poorest and most vulnerable section of the population. Notwithstanding the propagandists’ self-declared sympathy for the poor and downtrodden, the actual effects of their self-indulgence (which they could mainly themselves escape) on those very poor and downtrodden interested them not at all. And still the main advocates of the complete liberalisation of the drug trade, so that *all* drugs be freely available, come from the same social group, namely that which can escape the consequences of its own advocacy.

The model of human relations that was proposed, and that social reforms went a long way to promoting, was one freed of convention, contract and condemnation: only consent was important. Once the only thing that bound people together was the state of their affections at the moment, the full beauty of the human personality would be free to emerge. What actually emerged was breakdown and chaos, especially, of course, in the most vulnerable sectors of society.

Now every mature person knows that families can be hell. It is doubtful if there is a person, or at any rate many people, who could not tell a

horror story about his or her family. I know I certainly could. But in human affairs, the choice is not between hell on the one hand and heaven on the other, or perfection and unutterable vileness. Our lives are permanently unsatisfactory in some manner or another, and to take only one very obvious example—commitment to something or somebody automatically though voluntarily precludes many other possibilities. It is true of course that commitments are often broken because the flesh is weak however willing is the spirit. But now we have reached the stage where the flesh is weak and the spirit is weak, and the results are not at all pretty, as I discovered from my clinical work as a physician.

Hypocrisy, said La Rochefoucauld, is the tribute that vice pays to virtue; but at least it knows the difference. The only way that hypocrisy can be eliminated from human affairs, given that Man is an imperfect creature, is to destroy the distinction between vice and virtue, to deny its existence: and that is precisely what so much intellectual activity of the past century has been concerned to do.

In many cases this activity is humbug, of course. It can go to astonishing lengths. I once shared a platform with a woman who was in favour of prostitution. I asked her whether she would like her own daughter to be a prostitute, and she said that she would not mind in the least. I did not believe her; she said it only to appear unconventional or transgressive. Transgression is the new virtue.

Incidentally, a change of terminology can have practical effects. Prostitution is now universally called sex work in medical journals, as if it were just another form of employment. In Germany there was a brief and unsuccessful attempt to force women in receipt of unemployment benefits to accept sex work as they were forced to accept, say, hospital cleaning. The attempt failed because there was an outcry and everyone knows that sex work is in a different category from hospital cleaning: but the significant thing in this story is that the attempt was made.

So we may ask: what is the solution to the moral morass in which we now find ourselves? The first step is to change the culture. Of course, that is far easier said than done, as Jeremy Sammut explains in the pages that follow.