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Adultery (and other half revolutions)

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September 11, 2000

Retrieved on 6th November 2020 from crimethinc.com

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obedient or reactive. He would do better to expose what he is and wants to the whole world without guilt or remorse, and demand that it find a place for him and his desires, whatever they might be—then his own struggle could be the starting point for a revolution in human relationships from which everyone might benefit, not just a flash of isolated passion and insurgency to be stomped out before it even becomes aware of itself.

Let us shelter and defend him from the shaming of this society whenever he does step forward, so that he may do so—for he acts, as we do, out of a passion burning unquenchably for a new world.

“Hell yes I cheated!”

“What About the Children?”

“What about the children?” demand the shocked sentries of the bourgeoisie when they hear about yet another marriage endangered by an affair, terrified that their own strayings might come out next. Well, what about them? Do you think you can protect the next generation from the tragic tension between the complexity of desire and the simplicity of social prohibitions just by knuckling under yourself? If you smother your own aspirations for happiness, displacing them instead onto your expectations of future generations, you will end by smothering your children as well as yourself. Your children would be better off growing up in a world where people dare to be honest about what they want, whatever the consequences. Would you prefer that they learn to beat their own longings into flattened reminders of shame and remorse, as you do?

And it’s worth pointing out that nuclear-family monogamy, which these self-appointed judges would protect from the assault implied by adultery, is the very thing that replaced the broader, more fluid, extended family structures of the past. By all accounts, children were better cared for in those environments, and their parents had more freedom as well. Could it be that adultery is a blind, desperate lunge for the extended community that we once had, from the cage of the contractual relationship-or at least could act as a stepping stone to a new form of it?

Adultery is Marriage’s Loyal Opposition.

Ultimately, adultery is only possible because the questions it asks are left unanswered. Just like the shoplifter, the rioter, and the suicide, the adulterer makes only half a revolution: he violates the decrees of authoritarian convention and law, but in such a way that they remain in place, still dictating his actions-be those actions

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To cut to the heart of the matter: is it ever really wrong simply to desire not to be emotionally dead? What vast measures of self-confidence and entitlement would it take the modern married man or woman to risk feeling alive, unarmed with the twin weapons of self-justification and self-abasement, the excuses and apologies and self-recriminations? The adulterer discovers that he is trapped in the life he had adopted under the encouragement and threats of the established romantic standard, and, despite his best attempts to restrain himself, has begun to plot an escape. Were he to reflect lucidly on his situation, his secret self might rebel and begin to ask the important questions: What kind of life does he really aspire to live? How much freedom and fulfillment does he *deserve* to feel? How has it come to be that he hurts others just by reaching for what he needs for himself?

The fact is, people always get hurt whenever someone contests the long-entrenched order, even “innocent” people, and sometimes not the same innocent ones who were suffering at the hands of the old regime. That’s why anything less than complete prostration to the status quo is considered bad ethics. But once the itch to mutiny has struck, the alternative to it becomes unthinkable (consider how much thinking those who opt for it do)... so the adulterer takes it upon himself, often unwillingly but without being able to resist, to do things that hurt others, but no more than he absolutely has to. If he were prepared to embrace and proudly proclaim his outlawed desires (rather than ultimately rejecting them in a fit of apologetic revisionism: “I didn’t know what I was doing!”), and take responsibility for the further pain that would cause, he would finally stand in a position from which he could *step out* of the circle of hurt that is the scarcity economy of love. But he lacks the courage and analysis for this final act: that is why he is still a mere adulterer, one who makes half a revolution-and the worst half, at that.

What our society is missing here is the wisdom to know that telling the truth is not just the responsibility of the teller. If you really want to know the truth, you must make it easy for people to tell it to you: you must be genuinely supportive and ready for whatever it may be, not just make self-righteous demands or play good cop/bad cop (“just tell me, I promise I’ll understand... you did WHAT?!”). That can only lead to evasive action, or at best to the subject of your cross-examination finding ways to lie to himself as well as you. Neither our society nor, consequently, its cuckolds and cuckoldesses, are ready for the revelation of truth that the adulterer has to offer; it is only safe in the sheltering ears of his illicit lover.

“People Will Get Hurt”

Inevitably, despite the best intentions and most secretive schemes of the adulterer, people get hurt. More to the point: people already *were* hurting, only invisibly, in the enforced happily-ever-after of domestic silence, or else such drastic measures would not have been necessary in the first place to bring dead hearts to life. Would it be better that the routines and illusions of the marriage remain undisturbed, forever, so that everyone’s ennui could proceed on course to the embittered end? Could it be preferable for the unsuspecting partner to go on measuring her value as a lover and spouse according to the standard of a fidelity that boils down to self-denial, a standard which has already been violated in spirit or not in letter? Of course, instead of cheating you could always have gone to counseling, been “honest” with your spouse instead of yourself and turned away from the new landscapes you saw about to be born in the eyes of your potential lover, trying instead to achieve a passable imitation-substitute with your officially sanctioned partner-or resorted to medicating yourself into numb submission with television or Prozac, if that failed...

A spectre is haunting the Western world: the spectre of Adultery.

If the two-party relationship system is the pinnacle achievement of a hundred thousand years of human loving, why is adultery so common that it’s practically counted on as material for bourgeois drawing room humor ... and employment for a whole army of marriage counselors? If all any of us truly desire is our “one true love,” why can’t we keep our hands off everyone else?

If you really want to know, you should cut straight to the source and ask the adulterer himself. Or maybe you don’t have to go that far—maybe you’ve had adulterous affairs or inclinations of your own, as the statistics suggest.

“Good Marriages Take Work”

Growing up in an environment dominated by capitalist economics teaches certain psychological lessons that are hard to unlearn: *Anything of value is only available in limited supplies. Stake your claim now, before you’re left all alone with nothing.* We learn to measure commitment and affection in terms of how much others are willing to sacrifice for us, unable to imagine that love and pleasure could be things that multiply when shared. In a healthy relationship, conversely, friends or lovers enable each other to be able to do and live and feel *more*. If you feel, in your gut if not your head, that monogamy means giving something up (your “freedom,” as they say), then the patterns of exploitation have penetrated even into your romantic life. Such cost-benefit calculations just don’t compute.

We all know that Good Marriages Take Work. There it is again, *work*: the cornerstone of our alienation culture. Wage labor, relationship labor—are you ever not on the clock? Do you accept stifling limitations in return for affection and reassurance, the same way

you trade time for money at your job? When you have to *work* at monogamy, you are back in the system of exchange: your intimacy economy is governed, just like the capitalist economy, by scarcity, threat, and programmed prohibitions, and protected ideologically by assurances that there are no viable alternatives... again, just like the capitalist economy. When relationships become work, when desire is organized contractually, with accounts kept and fidelity extracted like labor from employees, with marriage a domestic factory policed by means of rigid shop-floor discipline designed to keep the wives and husbands of the world chained to the machinery of responsible reproduction—then it should be no surprise that some individuals cannot help but revolt.

Adultery, in stark contrast to the Good Marriage, comes naturally, arriving without even being invited. Suddenly you feel transformed: awakened from the graveyard of once-vital passion that has been your relationship, to feel that excitement again. You shouldn't be feeling any of this, damn it, and yet it's the first time you've been carried away by pure, unforced happiness in who knows how long—and oh, the sweet optimism of something new, something that isn't yet fucking predictable... it's as if surprise, risk, gratification, fulfillment were again genuinely imaginable possibilities. Who, if they could feel what you're feeling right now, could possibly demand you resist?

Stolen Moments...

The adulterer gets a crash course in just how occupied the space and time he lives in is. It immediately becomes clear just how little free time he has, time when he is not *under observation*—it turns out that the workday does not end when he leaves the workplace, but extends in both directions before and after it, consuming practically his whole life. The domination of his space, too, is revealed: how many places are there for him to spend time with his new lover,

places he need not rent with money, respectable explanations, and the image of social responsibility? In what few moments of his life is he not held to guidelines imposed by outside forces, guidelines which plainly have nothing to do any longer with his emotional and physical needs?

The adulterer becomes a virtuoso of petty theft, stealing the moments of his life one by one from their “rightful owners”: his spouse, his employer, family and social obligations. Just like the vandal, he resists the ownership of his world in the only way he knows how—by tiny and largely symbolic acts of daily sedition, out of which he carefully constructs an infinitely fragile alternate universe. There he hides, in spirit when he cannot in body, hoping not to be found out and called to account for what he has become: a traitor to the entire civilization that raised him.

“Honesty is the Best Policy”

Society, personified by his unfortunate spouse, demands that the adulterer be honest and frank about all things, when it will only punish him for this. It attempts to secure his compliance through routine interrogations (“who was that on the phone, dear?”), surveillance (“do you think I didn't notice how much time you spent talking to her?”), search and seizure (“and just what the hell am I supposed to think this is?”), and more serious intimidation tactics: the threat of total expulsion from the only home and community he is likely to know. The adulterer who would like to be able to tell the truth is forced to use the Misery Quotient to compute whether he can permit himself to: *divide your current unhappiness by the harmful consequences of contesting it, multiply by your fear of the unknown, and then think twice about whether you really need to act after all.* This is the same formula used by exploited migrant workers and children locked in private school hells, by battered wives and sexually harassed secretaries.