

## DEGENERATE MODERNS: MODERNITY AS RATIONALIZED SEXUAL MISBEHAVIOR

E. Michael Jones

Ignatius Press/259 pages/\$16.95

reviewed by *GEORGE SIM JOHNSTON*

In 1938, the English novelist Aldous Huxley admitted something that the other literary mandarins of his day probably wished he had kept to himself. Huxley's revelation was this: the real reason intellectuals of his generation had embraced modernism was that it gave them license to have unlimited sex. Modern intellectuals, of course, often pose as sexual revolutionaries. But until recently the squalid sex lives of people like Jean-Paul Sartre or Margaret Mead or Bertrand Russell were treated delicately by biographers. It is, after all, difficult to portray as a great friend of humanity someone who on every page is using other people, especially sexual partners, like Kleenex.

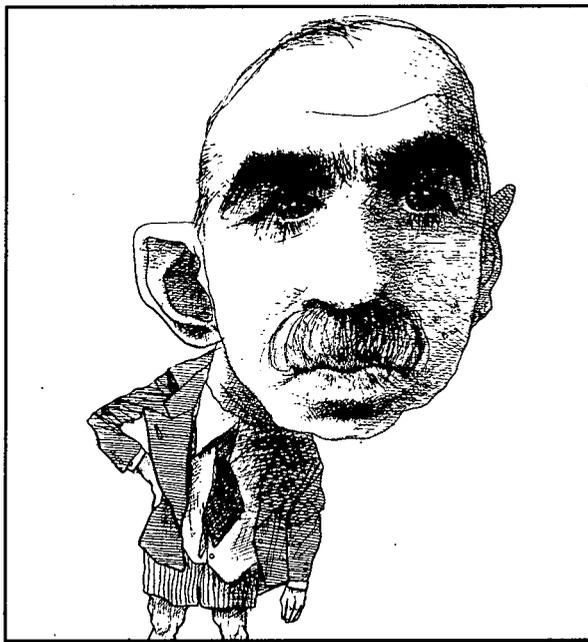
Apart from the usual white-washing of liberal icons, there was another reason for the biographical silence, one that has much to do with the spiritual dislocations of our age. Since Luther and Descartes, there has been in the West a notion that what we do with our bodies has no effect on how we use our minds. From this standpoint, it is easy to maintain that a Russell or a Sartre always managed to keep their obsessive sexual lives in a sealed container whenever they sat down to write philosophy. The more selfish and pathological their conduct is revealed to have been, the more fervently their disciples insist that there is no connection between what people do and what they think.

But a recent spate of biographies, notable for their lurid sexual detail, strongly suggest that the private lives of modern intellectuals cannot be breezily dismissed when

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taking stock of their ideas. A classic example is the economist John Maynard Keynes, the scratch of whose pen turned the Western democracies into fiscal junkies. Keynes was a promiscuous homosexual, but his first biographer, Sir Roy Harrod, refused to admit the existence, much less the significance, of Keynes's orientation. But Keynes would have done a great service if he had begun *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* with the disclosure that he was a Bloomsbury aesthete and practicing homosexual. He could have explained how he and his friends did not believe in self-denial or consider that they had any obligation to posterity. Perhaps as a result we might have lower federal deficits.

As E. Michael Jones shows in his brilliant new book, *Degenerate Moderns*, Keynes was hardly an isolated case. Jones's thesis is simple: Modernity is



rationalized sexual misbehavior. Lust, of course, is a common enough vice. But

the crucial intellectual event occurs . . . when vices are transmuted into theories, when the "intellectual" sets up shop in rebellion against moral law and therefore in rebellion against truth. All modern "isms" follow as a result of this rebellion. . . . All of them can best be understood in light of the moral disorders of their founders, proponents, and adherents.

The claim that the private vices of intellectuals can spread through the whole fabric of society like an ugly stain will land Jones in the same hot water as Paul Johnson, whose *Intellectuals* was another rogue's gallery of secular prophets who preached public benevolence while leading lives of the utmost moral squalor. Both writers show that the twin creeds of modernity—personal hedonism and social utopianism—are the products of the disordered lives of middle-class intellectuals. But Jones's book breaks new ground in probing the subtle regions of the human heart where desire confronts truth and rearranges it for its own ends. *Degenerate Moderns* begins with a quote from the German philosopher Josef Pieper, whose thoughts about this matter could not be more unfashionable or correct:

Since we nowadays think that all a man needs for acquisition of truth is to exert his brain more or less vigorously, and since we consider an ascetic approach to knowledge hardly sensible, we have lost the awareness of the close bond that links the knowledge of the truth to the condition of purity. Thomas [Aquinas] says that unchastity's first-born daughter is blindness of spirit. Only he who wants nothing for himself, who is not subjectively "interested," can know the truth. On the other hand, a selfishly corrupt will to pleasure destroys both resoluteness of spirit and the ability of the psyche to listen in silent attention to the language of reality.

Modern academics, unembarrassed by metaphysics, will scoff at the notion that the spiritual structure of our personality is deeply

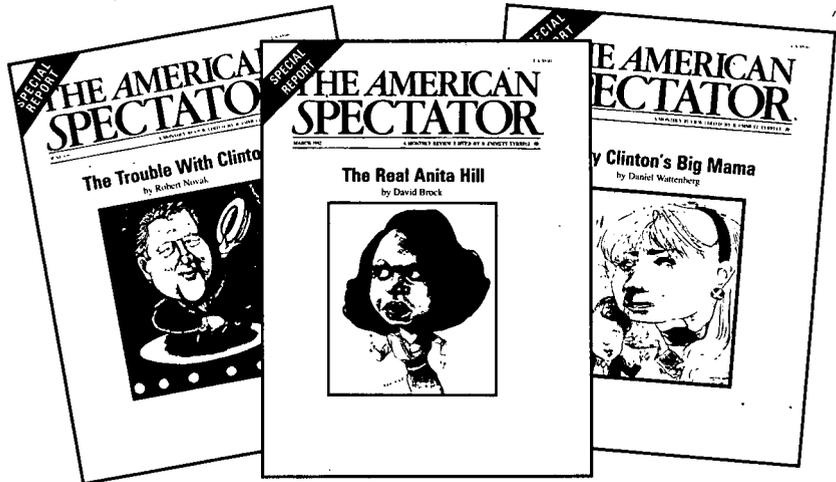
sensitive to sexual behavior. Nor will they like the idea that, under the guise of scientific objectivity, thinkers like Freud, Jung, Margaret Mead, and Alfred Kinsey constantly distorted the truth so that it would fit their peculiar sexual agendas. But Jones makes a strong case that this, indeed, is what modernity has been all about.

Jones's first "degenerate modern" (he could have found a subtler phrase) is the anthropologist Margaret Mead, whose reporting of the sexual habits of Samoans became a bible of modern paganism. Mead went to Samoa as a young graduate student in 1925; she spent a mere six weeks learning the language and then set about investigating the sex lives of the natives. The result was *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which has sold millions of copies in a dozen languages. In novelistic detail, Mead painted a paradise where sex was plentiful and guilt-free. A day in Mead's Samoa begins as "lovers slip home from trysts beneath the palm trees or in the shadow of beached canoes." Her Samoans "laugh at stories of romantic love, scoff at fidelity," and smile on "casual homosexual practices." Young Samoans, according to Mead, get so much sex in every direction that their adolescence is entirely free of the stresses which typify this period in more advanced cultures.

Mead's book was seized on by intellectuals like Bertrand Russell as proof that the sexual strictures of Judeo-Christianity were cultural accidents and that people could get along fine without them. Unfortunately, as anthropologists like Derek Freeman eventually showed, every detail of Mead's book turned out to be false. If anything, Samoans are more puritanical about sex than Westerners and place a far higher premium on female virginity. As for Samoan adolescence being a blissful period of sexual ease, Freeman found that the suicide rate for this group was and is unusually high and that many of the suicides relate to "shame at illicit sexual unions." And against Mead's claim that the idea of rape was "completely foreign to the Samoan mind," Freeman discovered one of the highest rates of forcible rape in the world, then and now.

*Coming of Age in Samoa* turned out to be, in Jones's words, "about as scientific

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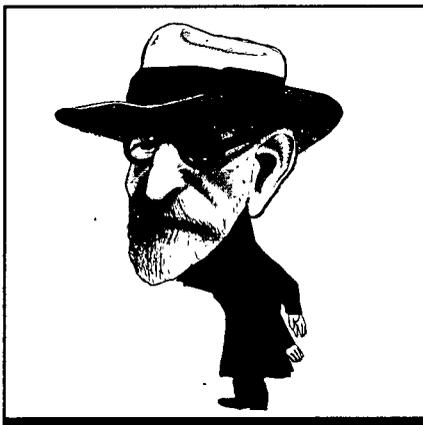
as the screenplay of *Blue Lagoon*." How, then, did Mead get everything so wrong? If Samoans are as sexually strict as Freeman and other anthropologists say, where did she get the idea that they regard adultery as unimportant? The answer comes from Mead herself. At the time she was examining the Samoans, Mead, who was married, had two affairs going, one with a man and one with a woman (the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, who was Mead's lesbian lover until Benedict's death in 1948). The young Mead belonged to a set of New York intellectuals who discovered sexual liberation decades before Haight-Ashbury. The relatively new discipline of anthropology lent itself to the rationalization of their behavior. As one of Mead's bitter ex-husbands wrote to her, her brand of anthropology was simply a "dishonest way of treating your private affairs."

It doesn't say much for the discipline of anthropology that Mead's book was, and still is, treated as a classic. As for Mead herself, her later life was spent making goofy, oracular pronouncements while descending a spiral of drugs (Dexedrine), sex, and the occult. This last item is of interest. In the thirties, Mead and Benedict were visiting a Harlem necromancer—as clients, not as researchers. After being diagnosed with cancer in 1978, Mead started visiting a Chilean psychic, with whom she discussed, among other things, the two "spirit guides" who accompanied her. Mead's biographer, Jane Howard, quotes someone who knew Mead as saying: "Many of Margaret's friends were most anxious lest anyone know that she, this public essence of rationality, went to a faith healer. . . . They were jolly lucky that the *National Enquirer* didn't find out."

**D**abbling in the occult, Jones demonstrates, has been a sideline for a number of modernist figures who are supposed to have been paragons of rationality. Freud was obsessed with the devil and first took cocaine on *Walpurgisnacht*, the night of April 30, 1884, in liquid form, in imitation, as a number of commentators agree, of the way Faust drank the magic potion in Goethe's play, which was being performed in Vienna at the time. Carl Jung, Freud's disciple who later broke with him, was involved with alchemy and UFOs. Marx as a young man wrote poems to

Satan. This is the dark, irrational underside of modernity that still awaits its master interpreter. It illustrates Chesterton's remark that people who don't believe in God will believe in anything.

The primary villain in Jones's line-up is Freud, whom Jones correctly views as an ideologue of atheism rather than a scientist. One of Freud's disciples wrote to him excitedly in 1930 that psychoanalysis "has reversed all values, it has conquered Christianity, disclosed the Antichrist, and liberated the spirit of resurgent life from the ascetic ideal." The chief goal of Freud's psychology was the transvaluation of all values. And at that it was very successful. It certainly hasn't cured many people. Toward the end of his life, Freud himself lamented that "our cures are less effective than Lourdes." (Freud, like many modern rebels, seems to have been obsessed by the Catholic



Church.) Jones's brilliant treatment of Freud suggests the reason why, in the long run, Freud's main impact on the history of psychoanalysis will have been merely to delay the introduction of pharmacology as the primary means of dealing with neurotic disorders. The Oedipus complex, for which there has never been a shred of scientific evidence, turns out to be, in Jones's words, "nothing more than Freud's personal history disguised and writ large." Freud detested his father (whom he called a "pervert") and had a violent sexual attraction toward his sister-in-law, Minna Bernays, which may or may not have been consummated. To say that the rest of us have the same compulsion is, in Jones's words, rather like Bonnie and Clyde telling us that mankind has a universal compulsion to rob banks.

But Freud, according to disciples like Peter Gay, is to be exempted from the sexual analysis that Freudians use to

undermine the credibility of everyone else. Here we get to the Achilles heel of modernism. Darwin, Marx, and Freud all claimed in one way or another that the human animal is driven by blind, irrational forces. "All thinking," writes Gay in his biography of Freud, "including the most abstract and objective, can be shown to have nonrational sources." As Jones writes, "If Gay really means 'all thinking,' then he must be speaking of Freudian thinking as well, in which case he has demolished his own ideology." Freudianism, like all modern "isms," is self-cancelling. If the human mind is the plaything of blind, material forces, then its productions, including *Das Kapital* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, have no objective value whatsoever.

**S**ome might disagree with Jones's use of biography to undermine the central tenets of modernity. Shouldn't theories be considered on their own merits, rather than on the basis of the messy lives of their progenitors? Well, yes—if the theory is truly scientific and therefore subject to what scientists call falsification. Newton was as weird as they come, but his theories can be tested and shown to be true for most of material reality. But modern ideologies are not scientific; they have an explanation for everything (natural selection, economic repression, the unconscious) and so finally explain nothing: when they run into contradictions, they simply mutate. And since many of them began as deliberate distortions of reality, the biographies of their founders are very much to the point.

Lately, we have been told that history, understood as an Hegelian clash of paradigms, is coming to an end. According to thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, democracy and pluralism, despite complications in the Balkans and elsewhere, are the final terminus of mankind. Books like *Degenerate Moderns* make one wonder, though. Is mankind going to spend the rest of its existence in what Jones calls "ever-constricting ruts" of sensuality and materialism? There are disturbances in the modern psyche which can elude a theorist sitting unmolested in a think tank near the Potomac, but which may yet play themselves out on a large canvas. The question is whether modernity turns out to be a free lunch. If the lives of its founders are any indication, that is a dubious proposition. □

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WHOREDOM IN KIMMAGE:  
IRISH WOMEN COMING OF AGE

Rosemary Mahoney

Houghton Mifflin/307 pages/\$21.95

reviewed by CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

In the course of two long volumes of autobiography, which deal in loving detail with such minutiae as his childhood toys and distant relatives' drinking habits, the Irish short story-writer Frank O'Connor never mentioned either of his wives—not once. Similarly, a friend of mine from the North Dublin neighborhood of Ballymun had an uncle who visited the same local pub every night for thirty years, until one night he sent a profuse note of apology to his friends that he would be missing his evening card game, due to his having to attend a funeral—his wife's. As recently as the 1950s, only 40 percent of Irish men in their early thirties had ever married—the lowest rate in the world. In Ireland the sexes are more separate than in any Western country.

For the Irish-American writer Rosemary Mahoney, this separation implies inequality, an inferior status for women—and she lays the blame squarely on the Roman Catholic church and the baleful influence of its sexual morality on Ireland's laws and culture. This emphasis leads Mahoney to overstress certain issues of only marginal importance to most Irish women (like homosexuality) and to short-change others that are of paramount importance (like equality in the workplace). But to grant her her subject: Divorce, abortion, and homosexuality remain outlawed in Ireland. And although contraception was legalized in 1979, "even the most liberal people," Mahoney writes, "are thinking in a way that is still, at its foundation, Roman Catholic."

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If Mahoney's diagnosis is simple-minded, her approach is complex. "As separate as men and women are in Ireland," she writes, "it is difficult to separate them." So she eavesdrops on Irish men and women for several months in both Dublin and the village of Corofin in County Clare, in hopes that the root of the peculiar Irish battle between the sexes will be found in a "vehement, mistrustful, precipitate way of relating" among the people themselves. It is an approach that has real promise. Mahoney has an effortlessly pretty prose style, and an uncanny eye for the littlest things Irish people do: that they sometimes greet you by grabbing your forearm, not your hand (or, when driving, by lifting an index finger off the steering wheel); that they say *stchewpid* (for "stupid") and *feck* and *shite*; that they give each other nicknames like Foxy John, the Mouth, and Over He Went. As a tour of Ireland through the lens of one particu-



larly vexing problem, this book is a delight.

An ability to withhold judgment—which at times amounts to a delightful self-deprecation at the stupid situations Mahoney has to throw herself into—is the book's saving grace and its glory. *Whoredom in Kimmage* is an exquisitely funny book—and it is the *only* funny feminist book. In a hilarious scene in a Dublin lesbian bar called J. J. Smythe's, Mahoney nervously tries to make conversation with two big women, who are pretty but menacing, with huge biceps, crewcuts, and tattoos. "I heard myself asking—unbelievably—*So, what do you girls do?* to which the redhead replied, *Work in a prison*, to which I said, *Prison! Nice!*"

Sometimes this acuity takes us right into the rift Mahoney wishes to expose, as when she points out a lunatic woman to a country farmer giving her a lift into town:

She wore a carrot-colored turban on her head. I asked the sweating farmer if he knew her.

"I do, of course. That's Mamie Duffy. We call her Mad Mamie. She is always going on about having been raped." He smirked in a wicked way that made me distrust him. "But she was not raped. I suppose she is still hoping. She is what we call an eccentric."

Here Mahoney does the right thing with an anecdote: follows it only until it ceases yielding insights—in this case into the callousness and brutality of rural Ireland's sexual dynamic.

Unfortunately, though, Mahoney has stacked her argument through her choice of interview subjects. Her Corofin rustics are almost exclusively men, and men of a particular kind—quaint, impotent, pathetic. Her Dubliners are, in general, the most radical, cosmopolitan, and alienated women she can hunt down. In the company of the former, Mahoney shows off her daunting descriptive gifts; with the latter, she formulates her political agenda.

The result is a book that lurches schizophrenically between Corofin and Dublin, and every time Mahoney re-introduces us to her Dublin activists, it's as if she has