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Love & Terror: Sex as a Weapon

By David Rosen
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Sexual relations – along with giving birth and death – are probably the most profound physical acts that human beings engage in. In the act of making love, each person lives out the deepest, most primal truth of the human condition, that people are creatures of nature.

However intimate or casual, sex between humans, like that between other animals, serves primarily one purpose, to reproduce — and perpetuate — the species. Everything else – from the pyramids to the atomic bomb and to the latest presidential election – are mere sideshows, what we call civilization.

But humans are sophisticated creatures of nature that can, like bonobo apes, enjoy sex for both procreation and pleasure. And pleasure comes in every conceivable form. Sadly, the same human desire for intimacy can drive sex into an act of rage ending in abuse, violence and terror. Such sexual terror can be experienced personally (e.g., self-mutilation, suicide), inter-personally (e.g., rape, pedophilia) or socially (e.g., prison rape, war crimes). The complexity of such relations is a testament to the still deeper complexity of sexual desire.

A recent *New Yorker* review by music critic Alex Ross, “The Sound of Hate,” analyzes the role that music and, more generally, sound plays as a weapon of war. Summarizing a fairly large body of scholarly writings, Ross reports that music was a feature at the Auschwitz death camp, noting, “the Nazis were pioneers of musical sadism.” Like Auschwitz, today’s prison camps are among the gravest environments for audio terrorism.

Ross details how the U.S. military and domestic police forces use music and other sounds as weapons of terror. They were used in the effort to capture former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, in the assault on the Branch Davidian cult, in the prisons in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantánamo, and against the popular protesters at Occupy Wall Street and in Ferguson, MO. Ross concludes, “To admit that music can become an instrument of evil is to take it seriously as a form of human expression.”

Sadly, much the same can be said about sex.

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In Western society, sex is a first sin. This belief was born out of an early Judeo-Christian culture that identified the original sin engaged in by Adam and Eve as involving two shameful activities – the knowledge of each other’s nakedness and the sexual coupling that generated the human race.

The *Old Testament* is more ambivalent about rape. In “Deuteronomy,” rape has a double meaning; one involving what might be called “love,” the other “terror.” Together, they frame the way that much of Western society has viewed sexuality:

If a man finds a young woman who is a virgin, who is not betrothed, and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are found out, then the man who lay with her shall give to the young woman’s father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife because he has humbled her; he shall not be permitted to divorce her all his days.

Deuteronomy 22:28-29.

As you approach a town to attack it, first offer its people terms for peace. If they accept your terms and open the gates to you, then all the people inside will serve you in forced labor. But if they refuse to make peace and prepare to fight, you must attack the town. When the LORD your God hands it over to you, kill every man in the town. But you may keep for yourselves all the women, children, livestock, and other plunder. You may enjoy the spoils of your enemies that the LORD your God has given you.

Deuteronomy 20:10-14.

Since Biblical times, many (men) in power saw sexual pleasure as a necessary — if immoral — indulgence. Privately, sex was tempting, a hidden indulgence; publicly (especially for women, minorities, homosexuals and the poor), it was a shameful act. Those caught or suspected of engaging in unacceptable sexual practices were often punished, expelled and killed. Nevertheless, rape — as an intimate, *defining*, aspect of gender relations — shaped Western society.

Today, two millennia later, sexuality has become the lubricant of what the Situationist’s called the commodity spectacle. Advanced capitalism’s consumer revolution integrated sexual pleasure into the marketplace, consecrating new forms of social tyranny. Sexual pleasure is both

mediated through the body's physicality and the human imagination. In the U.S. and much of the secular, postmodern West, all sex is acceptable as long as it's between age-appropriate and consenting people.

In the U.S. today, consensual commercial sex is a \$50 billion industry, protected by the First Amendment and a radical change in the nation's moral order. Sexuality flowered in the 1960s-'70s, shrunk during the AIDS terror of the '80s and now has become the new normal. Americans are, sexually speaking, "freer" than any time in U.S. history. Most remarkably, two-thirds (60%-65%) of "sex toy" purchases are by women.

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Sadly, in an era when apparent sexual "freedom," has never been greater and sexual taboos have significantly receded, adult sexual violence persists. (Sexual violence against children and youths, especially committed by adults, is a grave crime, but not considered in this article.) A thumbnail outline of sexual violence in the U.S. is deeply disturbing:

* One in five women and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives.

* Nearly half (46.4%) of lesbians, three-fourths (74.9%) of bisexual women and two-fifths (43.3%) of heterosexual women reported sexual violence other than rape during their lifetimes.

* Two-fifths (40.2%) of gay men, half (47.4%) of bisexual men and a fifth (20.8) of heterosexual men reported suffering sexual violence other than rape during their lifetimes.

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center is even more pessimistic. In a recent report, it finds that one in 10 women (91%) have been raped or suffered sexual assault; in eight out of 10 cases of rape, the victim knew the assailant, often an intimate partner. The forms of rape vary, including forced penetration, attempted forced penetration and alcohol/drug-facilitated completed penetration.

Sigmund Freud sought, in one of his earliest essays, "The Aetiology of Hysteria," published in 1896, to identify the cause(s) of the neuroses suffered by some of his female patients. Carefully analyzing these women, he found that many had suffered sexual violence as children. He speculated that these acts of childhood sexual terror contributed to the patient's mental illness later in life.

Today, we take Freud's insight as common knowledge. The sexual terror inflicting on a female (and male) child will have long lasting consequences, shaping her (or him) as an adult. A century-plus after Freud, old fashion sexual terror finds a variety of new forms of expressions. "Intimate partner violence" (IPV) is one example of the new-speak. The CDC defines IPV as "physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive acts) by a current or former intimate partner."

Rape is one form of IPV and includes attempted or completed, forced or alcohol/drug-facilitated unwanted vaginal, oral, or anal penetration. It is one of the widespread, most barbaric forms of

sexual engagement, of humiliation and terror. Rape is impotence masquerading as power; it is a most traumatic invasion that one person (male) inflicts on another (female). It is a forceful, painful, physical engagement, often involving abrasions of the genitals, vagina, anus and other body parts. Most disturbing, rape is neither necessarily sensually pleasurable nor an erotic turn on – except if the (male) perpetrator gets off on rape as a psychopathological indulgence. Rape is terrorized violence masquerading as sexual passion, lust; masculine impotence masquerading as power

Rape is more than the neutered pseudo-scientific in addition to being a form of IPV. Rape can occur when (almost) any two (or more) people mingle, intentionally or not; it can be a social act, whether committed as a crime (whether with a loved one or anonymously), a gang initiation ritual, prison rape or an act of war.

Prison literature and biographical reflections, from Dickens, Solzhenitsyn or Foucault, Malcolm X or Mumia Abu-Jamal, are testaments to the courage of truth telling in the face of the barbaric culture of prison life. And one aspect of this culture is sex behind bars. Some sex can be consensual, even in prison; people fall in love under the weirdest conditions. But male rape of men — like their rape of females — serves to harm the victim, both to physically terrorize and to psychologically shame. Male rape of another male asserts the darkest dimension of masculinity under patriarchy.

In 2003, Congress passed the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) requiring the Bureau of Justice Statistics to collect data and report on the incidence and effects of sexual victimization in correctional facilities. Its most recent findings, released in 2015, paint a pretty grim picture:

* The number of allegations of sexual victimization has increased by 39 percent since 2005 from 4,791 allegations to 6,660 in 2011; BJS notes that this was “due to increases in prisons.”

* In 2011, substantiated incidents of sexual victimization between inmates and those involving staff with inmates were nearly evenly split – between inmates as 52 percent and between staff and inmates as 48 percent.

* Among the estimated 1,390 youth who reported victimization by staff, nearly nine-out-of-ten (89.1%) were males reporting sexual activity with female staff, and 3 percent were males reporting sexual activity with both male and female staff.

Prison is a sexual hellhole.

* * *

William Tecumseh Sherman, the legendary Civil War general, pioneered the strategy of total war during his infamous “march to the sea” in 1864. He believed that war should be “total,” that it should extend from a conflict between recognized combatants to a conflict involving an enemy’s entire society, including its natural resources, farming and food supply, utilities and its civilian population. He also sanctioned rape and sexual terror.

Since the Civil War, rape has been increasingly integrated into what is known as total warfare. Women, girls and some boys have been singled out for systematic sexual abuse during civil conflicts and military campaigns. In the summer of 2007, Pres. George Bush issued a secret executive order permitting U.S. intelligence operatives to circumvent restrictions on the use of humiliating and degrading interrogation techniques. The order permitted U.S. operatives to effectively sidestep the legal and moral restrictions imposed by the Supreme Court and Congress (and formally approved by Bush) as well as Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions.

Much attention has been paid to waterboarding as an immoral — if not illegal — technique employed in the so-called War of Terror. However, little attention has been paid to the equally physically harmful and likely more long-term consequential technique of sexual humiliation and terror. In April 2008, Mark Mazzetti, writing in *New York Times*, posed an intriguing question: “That [executive] order specifies some conduct that it says would be prohibited in any interrogation, including forcing an individual to perform sexual acts, or threatening an individual with sexual humiliation. But it does not say which techniques could still be permitted.” Male prisoner rape appears to have been only limitedly employed against adult male captives detained in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantánamo or CIA black sites around the world.

One gains insight into the moral immorality of high-ranking government officials in a revealing comment made by Major General Antonio Taguba to Seymour Hersh in a *New Yorker* article. He described a meeting about Taguba’s report with Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and other high-ranking Defense Department officials. According to Taguba, “I described a naked detainee lying on the wet floor, handcuffed, with an interrogator shoving things up his rectum, and said, ‘That’s not abuse. That’s torture.’ There was quiet.”

Making matters even more sadistic, the festive, if not chaotic, conditions at the prison led male soldiers to engage in “consensual” sexual liaisons with female prisoners and even record their trysts for posterity. According to the Taguba report, “a male MP guard [was] having sex with a female detainee.”

* * *

Sex and music share one important feature, the ability to invoke extra-corporality, that humans are at once their physical beings – and something more. These pleasures remind people that they are living, human beings at once the human-all-too-human that Nietzsche mused about and the beings that Freud analyzed, at once a natural, individuated creature yet fully defined by culture and civilization, two very distinct yet intimate processes.

For centuries, and very much like a psychotic disorder, Western society has increasingly focused on the primacy of the individual. In the postmodern capitalist order, s/he is the primary decision maker, the person who determines how the family’s economy is lived out. Amidst the ever-increasing multitude of choices offered by the commodity society and the enormously complex globalized civilization now in formation, what is the place of the isolated, individualized person? Sex, like the vote and the paycheck, gives people fictitious hope.

For millennial, the sexual pleasures of romantic love, like classical music, has been celebrated as the truest expression of what it means to be human, civilized. Words, music, dance and art have ritualized the sublime experiences of erotic expression. Sadly, for all the postmodern pleasures we indulge in, pleasures earlier Americans would have found shameful, sexual terror persists.