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Grete Ujhely, “A Call for Sexual Tolerance” (1930)

Austrian-born writer and journalist Margaret (Grete) Ujhely (1903-1997) penned this “call” for *Der Querschnitt* [*The Cross Section*], a *zeitgeist* magazine geared towards an intellectual audience. The magazine was founded in 1921 by gallerist Alfred Flechtheim; it existed until 1936, at which point it was banned. In this article, Ujhely humorously describes the downside of the sexual revolution, which, as she explains, was felt by women in particular. Since she was of Jewish origin, Ujhely escaped Germany in 1938; she travelled first to Great Britain and eventually settled in the United States. She earned her Ph.D. and married psychologist and sexual researcher Hugo Beigel, for whose journal for sexual research she served as a writer and editor.

A Call for Sexual Tolerance

In those circles that consider themselves the leading ones, the ones confirmed in this superiority by curiosity, anecdotal obsession, and imitation, a prescriptive notion of sexuality has come into being which in its rigidity and severity yields nothing to the moral system of the Middle Ages but whose punitive sanctions are crueler than ever. It therefore appears to us that the time has once again come to break a lance for the sexual freedom of individuals and in particular of women, to break that lance which through all the social reshufflings of history has managed to keep itself, if only metaphorically, unbroken.

The days when the revolutionary was revolutionary are over in Europe (at least in the area of sexuality), and demands have turned into dogmas with amazing speed. Our courageous grandmothers fought for women’s participation in sexual pleasure, the essential component of which (probably because they did not know van de Velde) they recognized as the temporary renewal of their partner. Their granddaughters and grandsons, however, began, in their philosophical naiveté, to confuse right with duty.

With melancholy I recall a clever and attractive friend of my youth who once in the heat of a discussion contended that it belonged among the most sacred of human rights to engage, free of moral hypocrisy and police surveillance, and if such were the need, by the light of the day in the middle of the street, in that activity which nature has placed prior to the having of children. He expressed himself, by the way, more colloquially. But as his partner in the discussion (let us assume it was I) ... as I faint-heartedly objected, “But if I don’t have the need at all—must I

then?" ... he then responded with the gentle insight of the true prophet, affectionately and soothingly, "No, my child. If you don't want to, you don't have to."

Today, however, we have to. I do not mean exactly on the street, but in general. A girl or a woman who, for example, wishes to be faithful to her friend, or even to her husband, or who, for example in winter, is simply not in an erotic mood, or who for any other private reason whatever completely or temporarily wants to live chastely—she becomes with absolute certainty ridiculous. For a time, perhaps with wounding regret and occasional offensive remarks concerning her provincial origins, her deficient temperament, or her lack of erotic talent, she will be left in peace. But soon enough, society (understood in the broader sense as composed of intimates) hangs upon her its severest penalty: ridicule.

How comparatively easy it was to endure the expressions of intolerance of past decades: the whispering of envious girlfriends; dramatic scenes with the husband; the decline in invitations from the wife of the postmaster; parental curses; and heightened impudence among the gentlemen! Expressions in which recognition, even envy was too clearly betrayed for them to have been capable of serious offense.

But not only society—those twenty people with whom one by turn drinks tea, dances, and discusses problems—but literally everyone lays claim to the damning judgment of the unhappy woman who does not want to. Have you ever said no to one of the lords of creation? (Of course you have!) The result is a popular lecture for the next half hour from the angle of psychoanalysis, with primary emphasis on that nice, handy word *inhibitions*. When that stratagem comes to nothing, the man in his fine logical security concludes that you are either frigid or stupid. Usually both. The conclusion, which despite everything remains possible, that his nose perhaps does not appeal to you, has yet to be drawn. (I know, the man can come to no such judgment, once again because of [Alfred] Adler's competition principle, because it is out of the question that he cultivate in himself an inferiority complex. But in us, he may!)

A resolution as follows would therefore be timely, necessary, and liberating:

1. Every woman has the right, but none the duty.
2. If she declines, it is not a personal insult.
3. This does not mean that she is either a ninny or neuter or a lesbian. (*Very important!*)
4. Chastity suggests neither insult nor derision; it is rather a somewhat old-fashioned expression denoting a condition not subject to further objection.

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