Is pedophilia going mainstream?

JOHN LEO

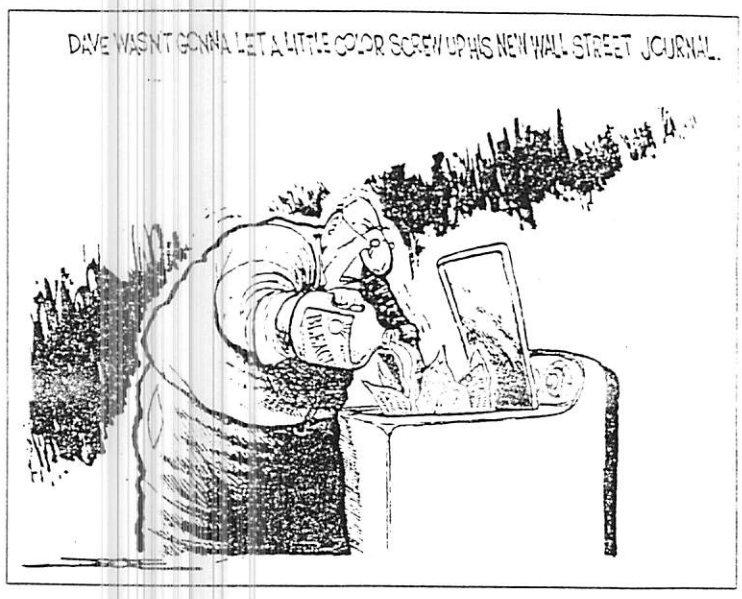
APRIL 14 — Back in 1981, an astute writer at *Time* magazine (that would be me) noticed that pro-pedophilia arguments were catching on among some sex researchers and counselors. Larry Constantine, a Massachusetts family therapist and sex-book writer, said children "have the right to express themselves sexually, which means they may or may not have contact with people older than themselves." Wardell Pomeroy, co-author of the original Kinsey reports, said incest "can sometimes be beneficial." A Minnesota sociologist included pedophile sex among "intimate human relations (that) are important and precious." There were more.

MY ARTICLE CAUSED some commotion, so the budding apologists for child molesters' lib ran for cover. Since then, frank endorsements of adult-child sex have become rare. But the pro-pedophilia (or anti-anti-pedophilia) rationalizations of the early 1980s are still in play. Among them are these: Children are sexual beings with the right to pick their own partners; the quality of relationships, not age, determines the value of sex; most pedophiles are gentle and harmless; the damage of pedophilia comes mostly from the shocked horror communicated by parents, not from the sex itself.

For example, take the controversy over the new sex book *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children From Sex*. The mini-uproar comes from the fact that the author, a journalist named Judith Levine, recycles some of the old arguments that play down the dangers of pedophilia. (The book has an introduction by Jocelyn Elders, so don't say you weren't warned.) Levine says pedophiles are rare and often harmless. The real danger, she thinks, is not the pedophile, but parents and parental figures who project their fears and their own lust for young flesh onto the mythically dangerous child molester. One section carries the headline "The enemy is us."

LEVINE OPPOSES incest and adult-child sex that involves authorities with power over kids. That would seem to include predatory priests, but Levine thought this was a good time to endorse some priest-boy sex. She told Mark O'Keefe of the Newhouse papers that "yes, conceivably, absolutely" a boy's sexual relationship with a priest could be positive. As you may have gathered already, Levine is wildly wrong about pedophilia and child-molesting. Her book is just terrible.

Harmful to Minors is a classic example of how disorder in the intellectual world leaks into the popular culture. In this case, I think the leakage comes from the "Rind study," which caused a national furor after it appeared in 1998 in the *Psychological Bulletin*, a publication of the American Psychological Association. The study's conclusion that child sex abuse "does not cause intense harm on a pervasive basis" was the highest level endorsement yet of the old no-harm rationalization for child sexual abuse. Understandably, the Rind study is the new Bible of pedophiles and their groups.



The study also called for a sweeping change in the language used to discuss child sexual abuse (a term the study rejected as judgmental). This delighted the pedophile movement, which favors terms like "intergenerational intimacy." One critic of Rind mockingly asked whether the word "rape" should now be changed to "unilaterally consenting adult-adult sex."

The Rind study was a meta-analysis, an academic term for noodling around with other people's old studies instead of conducting your own. Meta-analyses notoriously leave lots of room for omissions and arbitrary decisions to make different studies with different standards and definitions somehow fit together.

The major point about the Rind study is not whether it was intellectually shoddy (though I think it was) but that it shifted the national discussion several degrees toward the normalization of pedophilia. It will take a great deal more to convince the American people that tots have the right to select adult sex partners. But the terrain has been changed. Instead of virtually all Americans vs. the pedophiles, the Rind team (who grandly compared their case to the travails of Galileo) invited us to see it as scientific and fair-minded people who believe in openness and dialogue vs. meddling, anti-scientific, right-wing moralists. It invites the left and the center to view anti-pedophilia traditionalists as the real problem, just as Judith Levine says "the enemy is us," not pedophiles.

HERE'S AN EXAMPLE of the terrain change. For more than 20 years the pedophile advocate Tom O'Carroll has been a stigmatized outsider. Now he has been invited to address an international sex convention in Paris on the subject of privacy rights of pedophiles and their child partners (or targets). His pro-pedophilia book is on a course list at Cambridge University. O'Carroll is surprised and delighted by his new stature, and he thinks the Rind study brought it about. Intellectually respectable pedophilia? What's next?

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