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Why the Sexual Revolution Needed a Sexual Revolutionary

By R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Helen Gurley Brown's influence on American culture shows how important individuals are in affecting major moral changes.



AP Images

How do you turn the world upside down? In the span of just five decades, the moral and cultural world has been transformed by the sexual revolution. In terms of both public and private impact, no moral revolution can come close to the importance of the sexual revolution, and none has occurred so quickly. The moral world taken for granted in 1960 has virtually disappeared.

Helen Gurley Brown, who died last week at age 90, was one of the most important, if often underestimated, agents of that revolution.

Moral revolutions do not happen by accident, nor are they orchestrated by a cabal of cultural conspirators. As Kwame Anthony Appiah of Princeton University argued in his 2010 book, *The Honor Code*, moral revolutions do not emerge instantaneously. In most cases, the basic ideas and claims to

knowledge lay dormant for some time. In looking at moral shifts including the end of dueling and the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, Appiah notes that "a moral revolution has to involve a rapid transformation in moral *behavior*, not just in moral sentiments."

As his historical examples also make clear, a cultural revolution takes place only when the ideas crystallize and gain traction in the culture, and that requires the leadership of revolutionaries, ready to transform those ideas into a platform for moral transformation. And, as Appiah argues, this must include a change in moral behavior. Does anyone remember the 1960s?

Consider for a moment the moral universe of America in 1960, specifically its sexual morality. Marriage, generally understood as the union of a man and a woman, was considered the mark of adulthood and a bedrock of civilization. A survey published that year in *Ladies' Home Journal* (cited in Gail Collins's 2009 book, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*) indicated that "almost all" young women between the ages of 16 and 21 wanted to be married—and fast. Most hoped to be married by age 22, to work until their first pregnancy, and then to be at home with their children. Most indicated a desire for four children. Young men were expected to play their part, settling down for marriage and fatherhood.

Divorce was difficult, if not impossible to obtain, and it came with a taint of scandal that could doom professional prospects and personal reputation. Premarital sex happened, but it was discouraged. Homosexuality dared not speak its name, and lifestyles pressing for moral legitimacy today were virtually unknown to most Americans. Adultery was not only censured, but often penalized by both law and public condemnation.

Since 1960 we have experienced a moral revolution that has transformed every dimension of American life, and the death of Helen Gurley Brown is a reminder that the sexual revolution did not happen by accident. Like all revolutions, this one required moral revolutionaries.

The revolutionaries of sexual liberation would include some who did not live to see the transformation in full fervor, such as Alfred Kinsey (d. 1956) and Margaret Sanger (d. 1966). But the leading agents of the sexual revolution came from the generation who reached cultural influence just as the movement began to crystallize. This generation would include both Hugh Hefner (b. 1926) and Helen Gurley Brown (b. 1922).

1960 also marked the advent of The Pill. The first authorized prescriptions for the oral contraceptive came that very year, and that one little pill changed the moral landscape, separating sex and reproduction with chemical ease. The Pill was first made available only to married women, but that changed quickly.

When Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* hit the bookstores in 1962, it lit a firestorm of controversy. A former advertising writer, then recently married to a leading Hollywood producer, Helen Gurley Brown dared to scandalize the nation, virtually inventing the "single girl" as a cultural category. Brown urged

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young women to see themselves as empowered by sex, money, and men—but without any need for the traditional commitment to marriage.

Her argument was so scandalous at the time that no major publisher would touch the book. The bookstores were filled with books offering advice to young wives and mothers, but Helen Gurley Brown was openly inventing a new cultural category, the sexually liberated single girl.

The single girl "is engaging because she lives by her wits," declared Brown, who pointed to her younger self as a prime example of the empowered single girl she now celebrated.

And, most central to Brown's vision, the single girl is having sex, a lot of sex, and enjoying romantic relations with men, lots of men.

Most scandalous of all was Helen Gurley Brown's insistence that married men were not off limits for sexual affairs—not by a long shot. Married men, she advised, were among other things, "frequently marvelous in bed and careful not to get you pregnant."

As Jennifer Scanlon, author of a biography of Brown, documents, Helen Gurley Brown sought the scandal and controversy that came with the publication of *Sex and the Single Girl*, even attempting to orchestrate a censure of the book by church authorities in order to boost sales. She didn't need the censure: The book sold by the millions.

Helen Gurley Brown was later hired as editor of *Cosmopolitan*, a traditional women's magazine that she transformed into an engine of cultural revolution. In her years editing the magazine (1965-1997), she remade the "single girl" into the "Cosmo girl," arguing for the liberation of women by glamour, sex, and relationships with men. Housewives and coeds alike bought *Cosmopolitan*, which offered covers that were enthusiastic about sexual technique and the power of overt female sexuality.

The mainstream feminist movement did not see Brown as an ally, but a glance at the "hooking up" culture of today's university campus reveals that she won the argument. She lived long enough to welcome the reproductive revolution and the ability of women to have children without a husband.

She never acknowledged the cost of her revolution. Just weeks before her death Americans would learn that 41 percent of all births now occur outside of marriage, and that figure rises to 60 percent among women without a college education. The personal and public consequences of that new reality are massive.

She was a living contradiction, who argued that being the single girl was the ideal, but then married; and that married men were fair game for adulterous affairs, but then drew the line at her husband.

The lesson for those who, like me, believe that the sexual revolution represents a moral disaster is that such moral revolutions come like a great tidal surge, led by revolutionaries willing to scandalize mainstream culture, confident that their controversial ideas will one day move into the cultural mainstream. Helen Gurley Brown lived long enough to see it all happen, to mark the 50th anniversary of *Sex and the Single Girl* and to know that she had played a major role in one of the most significant cultural transformations in human history.

A single individual cannot accomplish a moral revolution, but such revolutions cannot happen without individuals who are willing to make their arguments in public, push them with energy over decades, and never sound retreat.

Helen Gurley Brown was not just a celebrity. She was a moral revolutionary who lived long enough to see the sexual revolution become our mainstream culture.

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