Review of *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy*, by Mark Regnerus. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2017. 262 pages. \$29.95

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Cheap Sex is about unintended consequences of the sexual revolution, which Regnerus attributes to the availability of birth control starting in the 1960s. His key claim is that men's easier access to sex has made it more difficult for those women who want committed, monogamous relationships to find partners for that package deal.

Unlike many of his fellow sociologists, Regnerus believes that there are biological differences between men and women in how much their behavior is motivated by the desire for sexual satisfaction. I am less sure how much of this difference is "hard wired," and how much comes from the cultural sexual double standard that shames women for nonrelational sex while giving men high fives.

Regnerus deploys ideas from exchange theory in sociology and market theories from economics. In this view, if I have something a man wants, I can get something from him in exchange for giving him what he wants. The more he wants it, the more I can get. But what I can get is decreased if he has alternative partners who will give it with fewer conditions. Applied to sex, Regnerus reasons that, because men want sex more than women, women will get something from men in return for sex. Traditionally this has been economic support and a committed relationship. A further implication is that what one woman can expect to get from her sexual partners depends on the conditions other women are putting on having sex.

When the birth control pill became available in the 1960s, it lessened the risk of pregnancy associated with sex. By allowing couples to have premarital sex with little fear of pregnancy, the pill led more women to delay marriage long enough to finish college and start a career. The gender revolution emanating from women's employment benefitted many, and Regnerus recognizes this, but he highlights negative consequences of birth control and women's economic empowerment for some women. In this vein, his key point is that, because some women responded to the reduced risk of pregnancy with freer sex, sex became "cheaper" for men, and this lessened the ability of other women to find men willing to make some relational commitment before sex. Regnerus suggests this is for two reasons. First, the market/exchange theory implies that fewer men will now commit to exclusive relationships because, unlike the men of earlier eras, they can find women who will have sex with them with no such strings. Second, the cultural piece is that, once a lot of people are having noncommittal sex, the statistical norm becomes morally accepted; a woman holding out for a serious commitment before having sex is now as likely to face peer pressure to drop her prudery as to be seen as morally admirable.

Regnerus also believes that the internet encourages "cheap sex." He argues that sites such as Tinder allow people to find casual partners more efficiently, and men's online pornography use combines with masturbation to compete with real women. All this, in his view, means that

women are less likely to get the commitment of a durable relationship when they want it from men. He forecasts that men may become less monogamous in marriages.

Regnerus' book is full of analysis of a recent survey he conducted, and contains quotes from qualitative interviews his team conducted. Some of this material is fascinating, but it is important to note that it is not evidence for his main thesis, because the thesis is about change over a period of over 50 years, whereas his survey data are contemporary. In fact, his central claims, as sketched above, are quite speculative. Thus, should we believe his central claim that some women's newfound willingness to have sex with fewer relational conditions adversely affects other women's ability to find men who will commit to them and be monogamous? Because I find the basic tenets of exchange theory sensible, I agree that, other things equal, it is a plausible hypothesis. But other things *aren't* equal because, due to birth control and many other factors, women have gained economic power relative to men since the 1960s; more are employed, and their earnings are higher. Regnerus deploys exchange theory but fails to notice its implication that women's higher earnings should help women get more of what they want in their relationships with men. According to exchange theory, women's earnings should lead dating women to be more able to get men to commit to exclusivity, if that is what they want. The earnings of cohabiting women should increase the control they have over the timing of moving to marriage. If a man is seeing a woman he likes, and she is pressing for more commitment, wouldn't her implicit offer to share more of her earnings with him as they move to a more committed relationship make the relationship more compelling to him?

Yet I think Regnerus is correct in the claim that it is more common for women than men to be the partner frustrated in their attempts to move a relationship up a notch in commitment. Although quantitative data are unclear on this, my read of recent qualitative studies (e.g., Sassler and Miller 2017) is that this is the more typical direction of gender mismatch. But because his own assumptions and preferred theory could just as likely have predicted women's *increased* rather than decreased ability to procure commitment from men, I'm not convinced that he has given us the correct explanation of this gender conflict.

Men are often dictating the terms and timing of their relationships, but I suggest we look elsewhere for explanations. Perhaps it is not the gender revolution but its incompleteness and stall that is the explanation (England 2010). Or perhaps we need new theories and insights.

References:

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Sassler, Sharon and Amanda Miller. 2017. *Cohabitation Nation: Gender, Class, and the Remaking of Relationships*. Berkeley: University of California Press.