Submitted to Men & Masculinities, January 2018

Book review:

Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy

Mark Regnerus

Oxford University Press, 2017

By Philip N. Cohen

Cheap Sex is an awful book that no one needs to read. The book is an extended rant on the theme, “Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?” wrapped in a misogynist theory about sexual exchange masquerading as economics, and motivated by the author’s misogynist religious and political views.

Regnerus is a sociologist with a documented record of both academic dishonesty and poor quality research, a history I have summarized elsewhere (Cohen 2018a). Given this history, I asked for a copy of the main dataset he used, the *Relationships in America* survey, to verify his analyses. Despite his public promise that the data would be made available in 2015, my request was refused. Therefore, I do not accept as evidence the results he reports in this book since they are not subject to verification. Here I review the quality of his theory, arguments, and the methods he describes himself using. (Some of these comments are distilled from complete notes I posted in [Cohen 2018b]).

Regnerus starts from the observation that “men want more sex than women do, on average.” In a fatal crime against logic, he immediately transforms that difference in central tendency into a theory of opposites in a system of exchange. “Economically speaking ... women have what men want. ... So in the heterosexual mating market broadly understood, there is demand – interested men – and supply: women” (pp. 24-25). The imbalance in sexual desire between men and women is not a recent phase or modern innovation, in his view. Rather, it is a fixed quality of human nature, and this exchange dynamic is thus “rooted in stable realities about male-female differences that are not socially constructed and will not disappear” (44).

“Sex is cheap,” Regnerus writes, in the closest he gets to a definition, “if women expect little in return in return for it and if men do not have to supply much time, attention, resources, recognition, or fidelity in order to experience it” (28). The “price” of sex only refers to what men pay for it; the “exchange” is men buying, and women selling. In fact, he states categorically (and of course falsely), “women never pay men for sex” (24).

The practice of women allowing men to have their sex without a promise of marriage—made possible because women now have the Pill and jobs—goes against all of human history, and undermines men’s motivation to accumulate resources and achieve higher status, which they used to need to obtain that which they most desire. Hence, “Kendalia, a 32-year-old African American woman from Milwaukee cohabiting with an unemployed man who spends most of his days playing video games and watching pornography” (50). She is already giving him sex (if not quite enough), so why should he get off the couch?

With loose women, pornography, and masturbation (“arguably at an all-time high” [138]) sapping men’s will to either succeed or marry, Regnerus sees a rapid descent into moral crisis, epitomized by rampant homosexual behavior – which is not to be confused with homosexuality itself, something he never concedes exists naturally. “Just because someone self-identifies as something other than heterosexual,” he writes, “does not mean they are able to just opt out of deeply embedded sexual differences in socio-sexual behavior” (82). The moral crisis is now, tragically in his view, institutionalized through the legal recognition of same-sex marriage (which Regnerus strenuously, if haplessly, opposed as an expert witness in the courts).

The deep misogyny in Regnerus’s thinking is apparent in his description of women’s responsibility for modern moral decay. “Remember,” he intones. “Sex is her resource, and in a consensual relationship she controls access to it. It doesn’t happen if she doesn’t permit it” (95). Of course, the definition of “consensual” means sex would only happen if *both* partners “permit it,” but such obvious logical errors are no match for Regnerus’s ideological blinders.

Regnerus reports that he and his team did 100 interviews of young adults. However, the book contains no systematic information about them, or information on how they were sampled or interviewed (although he does mention the race of several who are not White). Very few of are quoted, and in those cases they usually serve either to repeat his conclusions back to him or as objects of his contempt. For example, he quotes a 25-year-old woman as saying, “relationships are more casual than they used to be ... So I think now that may, maybe it’s because women have taken on a stronger role in both relationships and, and pretty much everywhere that that might have something to do with it” (96). This is a restatement of Regnerus’s thesis.

In the most egregious case of showing contempt for his respondents, he scoffs that one woman’s “high hopes for enduring marriage seem noble,” but she has “disdain for dependence upon a husband” and “knee-jerk criteria for leaving.” What are those “knee-jerk criteria”? She is quoted as saying, “Maybe one day my husband will fall in love with somebody else. What am I gonna do? Or he cheats on me or he hits me. You know, then I’m gonna have to get out” (159).

In addition to the reported interviews, Regnerus offers some cursory analysis of the surveys he commissioned. This includes a few descriptive statistics, and regressions with variables coded in ways that are not disclosed, so the reader cannot evaluate the models. There is also some shameless *p*-hacking, most obviously in his use of an asterisk to indicate $p < .10$ instead of the conventional $p < .05$, without explanation. In one egregious case he adds a variables to a model, producing no change in the coefficient of interest, but the asterisk disappears, leading him to declare triumphantly that the variable “no longer matters” (77-80).

The book suffers from poor writing and copy editing that makes it hard to follow the arguments. For example, he repeatedly misuses the word “predictable.” He refers to mating markets in the old days as a time when there were “roughly equal numbers of men and women, whose bargaining positions – averaged together – were roughly comparable and predictable” (35) – a nonsensical pile of words. Elsewhere, he refers to relationships as “growing increasingly predictable,” when he is actually describing an increase in diversity, which means they are less predictable (5); and then later he writes, of the trend away from heteronormativity, “the effect of it on mating market dynamics is almost certain, but it is not simple to predict,” without recognizing that “certain” things are by definition “simple to predict” (60). Another problematic word is “it,” which readers will tire of chasing around in passages such as this: “We are simply not free to write off fertility’s debt to love, its desire for exclusivity, and its idealization of marital union. It will resist and reemerge, if even only in wounded form” (184).

There are true things in this book. For example, the Pill has had a large effect on sexuality, women's advancement and cultural adaptation have contributed to the decline of marriage, and pornography has corrosive effects on some people's relationships. These are not new here, nor are they advanced in Regnerus's telling. Readers interested in these topics should look elsewhere.

References

Cohen, Philip N. 2018a. *Enduring Bonds: Inequality, Marriage, Parenting, and Everything Else That Makes Families Great and Terrible*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Cohen, Philip N. 2018b. "Notes for a Review of 'Cheap Sex,' by Mark Regnerus." Family Inequality (blog). January 5. <https://familyinequality.wordpress.com/2018/01/05/notes-for-a-review-of-cheap-sex-by-mark-regnerus/>.