

# Polymorphic Party Play:

## What is Forbidden?

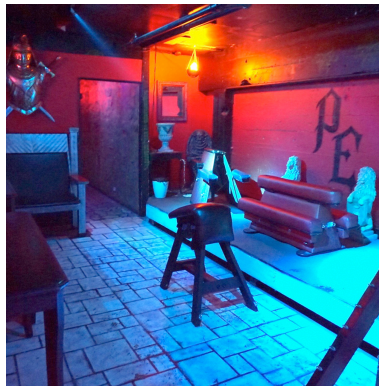
By David Rosen

*Lust and wickedness are acceptable to me,  
I walk with delinquents with passionate love.  
I feel I am of them – I belong to those convicts and prostitutes  
And henceforth I will not deny them – for how can I deny myself.*  
Walt Whitman<sup>1</sup>

### What is Forbidden

Soft moans hold the audience's attention; a breathless silence fills this dark, marijuana-scented sex club in a run-down building in San Francisco's SoMa district. A tall, thin woman with short-cropped hair tenderly caresses her lover's naked body. Dressed in black tights with knee-high boots and a short leather vest, she takes up a small electric vibrator delicately strokes her playmate. Strapped at her wrists and ankles, the lover lays prone and willingly helpless on a leather-covered masseuse's table. Wearing nothing but a blindfold and a chain-link dog collar, she pulsates to her lover's touch.\*

The lovers appear oblivious to the crowd that has gathered to watch their performance. Forty or so men and fifteen women, mostly in their 30s and 40s, diverse in race, class and style, have spontaneously assembled to enjoy this act of performance art. Throughout the night, participants will engage in public and private sexual encounters within the confines of this adults-only sex club. Sometimes the "performers" will be two or more players, sometimes solo actors; they will engage in heteroerotic play,



sometimes homoerotic acts but only between women. Some use electric toys, whips, bondage restraints and some use only their all-too-human touch. There are, however, "house rules" that are scrupulously followed: No unsafe sex, no spilling of blood, no violation of personal privacy unless invited. This is a smart, postmodern club, where people gather to push the limits of sexual pleasure in the age of AIDS.

This sex club, the Power Exchange, is an example of a growing, nationwide network of adult deviant sexual fantasy and play. It represents

America's 4<sup>th</sup> sexual revolution, this one pushing further the revolutions of the 1840s, 1920s and 1970s. In distinction to earlier movements for sexual reform, today's revolution remains unseen and unacknowledged, hidden behind a background of Christian evangelical

battles over cultural values, local wars against pornography, media pursuit of sex offenders and periodic sex scandals involving celebrities and politicians.

Hidden beneath the shadow of the religious right's culture wars, a sexual insurgency emerged and spread among consenting adults. Much of it is noncommercial in character, involving

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\* Photo: SF Weekly

what has been traditionally identified as illicit or nonconventional sexual practices. A good deal involves commercial relations, often involving kinky sex like sadomasochism (s&m) and bondage & discipline (b&d). Equally important, it is taking place within an expanding cultural environment of media, fashion and advertising industries aggressively exploiting references to a wide variety of deviant sexual indulgence. Hidden in plain sight, a new sexual revolution is taking place in America.

### Swinging

"Swinging' is not really a favored term anymore," declares Tony Lanzaratta, a retired Los Angeles police officer and head of the nation's largest swingers association, NASCA International. (NASCA originally stood for North American Swing Club Association.) "Swinging kind of connotes 1950s wife-swapping crap," Lanzaratta adds, "it has little to do with that, and that's why lifestyle organizations prefer to use the term 'play couple.'" Referring to San Diego, for example, Lanzaratta says that it is a virtual hotbed for what he calls "play couples." "A lot of people just have little neighborhood get-togethers in their homes, five or six couples who go for it."<sup>2</sup>

Mate swapping represents just one of a growing universe of illicit sexual practices flourishing throughout Bush-era America. Having flourished during America's 3<sup>rd</sup> sexual revolution of the '70s, it is again fashionable. NASCA identifies 168 swingers clubs across the U.S., with California (26) and Texas (20) having the greatest number. In addition to intimate liaisons at members' homes, swingers meet in party venues throughout the country, from Philadelphia (Club Kama Sutra) to Miami (Miami Velvet) to Mountain View, CA (BackDrop, the nation's oldest swing club). They also gather at various local and national

conventions like Hedo-fest (Washington, TX), Couples Choice (Eagle Nest, NM), the Orlando International (Orlando, FL) and Life Style West (Las Vegas).

Sexuality has long been a battleground in American society. Today, the Christian right continues its culture wars over abortion, gay marriage, pornography and sex offenders. Nevertheless, since the Democratic Congressional victories in the 2006 election, there's been a noticeable relaxation in the cultural wars. A more tolerant cultural climate has emerged, one facilitating the growing popularity of formerly "illicit" sex among consenting adults.

Illicit adult sexual practice seems more widespread than at any time in American history. Such sex is an historical evolving category of sexual practice involving traditionally deviant practices engaged in voluntarily by consenting adults. While oral sex and light s&m and b&d were once considered deviant, they have now been integrated into acceptable or "healthy" adult sexuality.

Over the last decade, deviant sex or "perversion" has been redefined to involve what psychiatrists call "non-pathological" or "egosyntonic" deviance – deviance without pathology or guilt. Deviance differs from sexual pathology because of the voluntary or consensual nature of the participation. Involuntary or nonconsensual sexual practices, whether labeled pathological or illegal acts, like pedophilia, rape, sex slavery or lust-murder, violate the autonomy or humanity of one or more of the participants.<sup>3</sup>

While no authoritative estimate of the number of adults engaged in consensual deviant sexual practices is available, these practices are not uncommon. Heterosexual couples across the country regularly meet at

"swinging" or "swapping" get-togethers; gays and straights attend both commercially-licensed and private "play parties" to engage in a variety of couple- and group-sex activities.

Reflecting still further the changed sexual culture, these gatherings are no longer public secrets, restricted to backrooms or red-light districts. They are often listed in weekly free newspapers and online websites like craigslist. With little fanfare, a new sexual revolution is taking shape against a background of evangelical Christian and conservative "family values."

#### The sexual underground

America has long sustained a vigorous sexual underground. From the earliest brothels and "bawdy houses" in Revolutionary-era port cities to today's play parties and s&m get-togethers, Americans have long partaken in a wide variety of deviant or illicit sexual practices. A wink-and-nod culture, often lubricated by bribes and organized crime, permitted men and, to a lesser extent, women to engage in illicit or unacceptable sexual practices.

This deviant underground has repeatedly challenged mainstream sexual culture especially during America's three preceding sexual revolutions, during the 1840s, 1920s and 1970s. Each contested existing social conventions and pushed the limits of sexual experience. To appreciate the historically unique character of today's 4<sup>th</sup> revolution, it is important to appreciate the earlier revolutions.

Amidst the fervor of the Great Revival, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Awakening that swept rural America during the 1830s and '40s, thousands of Americans challenged conventional values and joined new religious and utopian groups. Many were drawn by the unconventional sex

roles, marriage arrangements and property relations these groups promoted. Upstate New York, popularly known as the "burned out district," was the epicenter of much of this religious fervor. Since the 1780s, it was home to the Shakers and in the 1830s spawned the Oneida Perfectionists and Mormons. Still other utopian communities of the era included Modern Times (on Long Island, NY, and Berlin Heights, near Cleveland, OH) and Memnonia (near Yellow Springs, OH). Together, these groups exemplified a remarkable social experiment that set the stage for 20<sup>th</sup> century sexual mores.<sup>4</sup>

Oneida is illustrative of 19<sup>th</sup> century "free love" movement. It was founded by the charismatic visionary, John Humphrey Noyes, who believed that every person could experience "perfect holiness". He conceived this holiness as "Bible Communism," drawing inspiration from Matthew: "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven". [Mt: 22:30] For Noyes, as with many 19<sup>th</sup> century utopians, holiness was intimately linked to sexual pleasure.

Oneida practiced what Noyes called "complex marriage." In such an arrangement, every woman was to be married to every man and every man was married to every woman. In principal, men and women could have sexual relations with anyone (of the opposite sex) they wanted. Sex was to be an art and "sexual selfishness" was rejected.

Noyes settled in Oneida fleeing a likely adultery conviction in his native Putney, VT, based on a group-living arrangement with another couple. He founded his communitarian settlement in 1848 with a core group of thirty supporters. Oneida women shunned the then-conventional long dress for short skirts and pantaloons. By 1878,

Oneida had more than 300 adherents and with branches in Wallingford, CT, Newark, NJ, Putney and Cambridge, VT, and Brooklyn, NY. The community formally dissolved in 1881.

One of the distinguishing features of the sexual relations at Oneida was the adoption of a novel birth control technique – "male continence," intercourse without ejaculation. Birth certificate records indicate that it was not a fool-proof method. It acknowledged and attempted to deal with two basic features of patriarch – exclusive male sexual fulfillment and the traditional linking of pleasure from procreation. Oneida came under repeated public attacks for its radical living arrangements.

Each 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian community had its own unique forms of social and sexual relations. Where the Perfectionists embraced "complex marriage," the Mormons believed in polygamy among male leaders of the order. The Shakers were radical communitarians, believing in the communal ownership of property and that men and women were equals. Equally radical, they opposed marriage and practiced celibacy; the Shakers believed that sex was a sin. Collectively, these movements challenged conventional notions of propriety and pleasure.

The Roaring '20s is fondly recalled as the era of speakeasies and bathtub gin, jazz and race mixing. One of the hidden aspects of the '20s was how Prohibition facilitated sexual revolution. This revolution ranged from the shortening of woman's skirts, the use of lipstick and her adoption of smoking. It also involved greater freedom of artistic expression in theatre, music, literature and motion pictures. It witnessed a significant expansion of prostitution and the popularity of nearly-nude burlesque shows, traveling carnival girl shows

and urban sex circuses. All helped spread a new, illicit eroticism throughout the country.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to selling illegal alcohol, many speakeasies facilitated prostitution. The common speakeasies found prostitutes congregating like other customers and solicited business, but left the *speak* with a date to conduct their affairs. In other speakeasies, prostitutes worked as hostesses and solicited sexual services. The prostitutes either provided a hurried encounter in an on-premise private booth, upstairs room or backroom or left to conduct the sexual encounter at a nearby apartment crib, hotel room or secluded alleyway. At these *speaks*, the hooker gave a kick-back to the saloon's management. However, the most notorious speakeasies functioned like brothels. Here the prostitute worked as a "resident" or "sitter" and the sexual exchange took place in the *speak*'s backroom.

"Girl shows" were another form of live sexual performance during the '20s. They often were part of touring carnivals, the unique sideshow that first appeared at the 1893 Chicago Exposition. Its target audience was small-town and rural America. By 1920, there were an estimated two hundred operating throughout the country.

"Girl shows are distinguished by how 'strong' the dancers are allowed to perform – in other words, by the extent of sexual abandon of the dancing routines and the degree of genital display," notes the historian Robert Allen. He adds:

In the large and more sedate carnivals (those that play state fair dates, for example), the performance might end with a strip down to the G-string or its removal for a moment just before the dancer leaves the stage." He goes on to point out that "[i]n the smaller shows, however, where

'stronger' acts are the norm, the performance might end with a gynecological anatomy lesson....<sup>6</sup>

Another erotic art form of the Prohibition era was burlesque. In its hey-day, burlesque was like no other form of sexual presentation and most admirably mirrors America's evolving attitude towards sexuality. It made its U.S. debut in New York on 28 September 1868, when the British star Lydia Thompson took to the stage of George Wood's Broadway Theatre to perform in *Ixion*. Thompson was a national sensation and, almost single-handedly, instituted a new, popular art form that competed with the traditional legitimate theater.

What originally distinguished burlesque from the other popular forms of male entertainment was the radical appeal of the female performers, stars following in the mode established by Thompson. Forgotten today, their appeal was founded on a compelling presentation of female identity. This identity uniquely combined what Allen has called "sexual allure and inversive feminine insubordination." He clarifies:

"Either half alone could be controlled and made to please without seriously undermining the position of the male spectator. Fused together in a single performer, however, this combination was much more threatening." The original burlesque stars directly engaged her male audience, challenging established masculine prerogative, undermining their exclusivity to erotic desire and, thus, foreshadowing the post-feminist pop stars of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, burlesque faced intensifying competition, notably from movies among prerecorded media and from cabarets and revues among live formats. In response — and apparently as the result of a very

intentional "accident" — the striptease was introduced into burlesque around the time of World War I and quickly became the dominant mode of presentation.\* According to legend, May Dix performed the first "strip" at the Minsky Brothers' New York theatre:

In 1917 they constructed a runway into the auditorium so that patrons could examine cooch dancers more closely. ... May Dix did her dance act in a short black dress with detachable white collar and cuffs. At the end of her song one hot summer night, she removed her collar as she walked offstage, trying to forestall the next laundry bill. Someone in the audience demanded an encore, at the end of which she removed her cuffs as well. 'Between the heat and the applause [reports Morton Minsky], May lost her head, went back for a short chorus, and unbuttoned her bodice as she left the stage again.'

The striptease was "burlesque's last-ditch and ultimately unsuccessful strategy to stay alive."<sup>8</sup>

The wildest sex scenes of the '20s sexual revolution were reserved for what were popularly known as sex circuses. As Eric Garber discovered, they "were raucous establishments where illegal activities such as drinking, gambling, and prostitution were available." And, as he found, "others offered a variety of sexual pleasures cafeteria-style." Most of them were held in urban black communities like New York's Harlem and were an integral if largely hidden part of the Roaring '20s. It was also "the heyday of lesbian and gay clubs and performers in Harlem."

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\* The striptease appears to have made its first appearance at the St. Louis Exposition of 1896 when Omeena performed what was called the "take off." [Allen/230] There also seems to be considerable overlap between more lower-class vaudeville and extreme burlesque. [Clement/236-44]

Circuses were often set up in "buffet flats" — apartments rented out for social functions. Rent parties were a tradition brought from the South with the great migration, a tradition that was continued in all the big Northern cities. For a modest admission fee (often 25 cents), visitors were treated to "dancing and jazz, and bootleg liquor for sale in the kitchen." One could dance for free, but food, alcohol, drugs and sex were priced extra — and people paid.

However, with the coming of the Great Depression and World War II, the radical sexual experiences of the '20s came to a long hiatus. The post-War consumer revolution slowly began to remake popular culture and helped launch not only Billy Graham and America's 3<sup>rd</sup> awakening, but America's 3<sup>rd</sup> sexual revolution as well. This movement gained momentum with the tumultuous upheavals of the 1960s. The combined force of the Civil Rights movement, anti-Vietnam war mobilization and emerging women's and gay liberation movements helped push the demand for greater sexual freedom. The popularity of "Playboy" magazine and the Playboy Club (the first one opened in 1960), the adoption of the birth-control pill and, eventually, the Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 set the parameters of this revolution. Unfortunately, the AIDS epidemic of the '80s ravaged the gay community and brought an end to America's 3<sup>rd</sup> sexual revolution.

During the '70s, America's sexual vocabulary changed. Sex was in the air, in the media and in every relationship. Not surprising, there was an increase in the venues catering to heterosexuals, homosexuals and bisexuals who sought to fulfill their wilder sexual desires. These ranged from explicit sex clubs to invitation-only "swing" or "swap" clubs that attracted married couples, to gay

bathhouses to venues offering the most specialized sexual indulgence. With the 3<sup>rd</sup> sexual revolution, anything seemed possible.<sup>9</sup>

The Sandstone Ranch Sandstone was the most well known intentional sex community of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sexual revolution. Secluded in the hills of Topanga Canyon, just north of Los Angeles, it was, as Gay Talese reported, a place "like none other in America, an audiovisual aphrodisiac, a *tableau vivant* by Hieronymus Bosch." Founded by John and Barbara Williamson in 1969, it drew a fairly wide and often distinguished following among "free love" advocates and others exploring their heterosexual desires. The sexologists Alex Comfort and Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen, the journalists Gay Talese and Max Learner, the artist Betty Dodson, the performer Bobby Darin and political activist Daniel Ellsberg were among the regulars. According to the historian John Heidenry, at "its high point, membership rolls reached 275 couples...."<sup>10</sup>

Estimates vary as to the scope of such clubs. Two swingers, William and Jerrye Breedlove, in their 1974 book, *Swap Clubs: A study in Contemporary Sexual Mores*, provide the most bullish estimates. Extrapolating from data from findings of Alfred Kinsey's Institute for Sexual Research at Indiana University, they report: "The number of swap clubs in 1953 was probably less than 2 percent of the married couples between the ages of 20 and 45 years. In 1963, it was probably above 5 percent. By 1973, the total will probably reach 15 percent — maybe reaching all the way to 25 percent before leveling off."<sup>11</sup>

However one reads the Breedloves' findings, a distinct sexual sub-culture existed and, for those who sought it out, could be found and joined. They report that mate-swapping groups

operated not only in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco (90 couples participating), but in mid- and small-cities like Baltimore (32 couples), Detroit (42 couples), Philadelphia (more than 100 couples) and Seattle (34 couples). Heidenry claims that at their height “[s]wing clubs had opened in nearly every state in the Union, with twenty-seven in California alone, and most of Canada.” America was alive with swappers.

Swap clubs operated in Chicago, San Francisco and other cities. In New York, they had names like the Castle, Catacombs, Chateau 19, Club O, Fifth Dimensional Jazz Club, Handball Express, Hothouse, Inferno, Mineshaft and Percival’s. However, the club that gained the most notoriety was New York’s Plato’s Retreat, located at the Hotel Ansonia, premises of the former Continental Baths, on the Upper West Side.

In November 1979, Plato’s Retreat reached its zenith. As Heidenry retells the story, “an occasional porn actress named Tara Alexander took on eighty-six men, four at a time, in a nonstop six-hour spectacle dubbed the Supermathon.” The performance was so provocative that it was videotaped and rebroadcast over a New York X-rated cable show, *Midnight Blue*. Was the sexual olympics conceived at this event?

The atmosphere at gay clubs was even more radical. Among New York clubs were the Anvil, Cock Ring, Mineshaft and Sewer, with the most notorious being the Anvil and the Mineshaft. The Anvil was located on West 14<sup>th</sup> Street and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue, in the heart of the meatpacking district, which then had little residential population and was deserted late at night. One regular visitor, Philip Gefter, described it as “Weimar culture ... on acid. It seemed more like a club with a kind of festive, ersatz honky-tonk atmosphere that the

dingy, seedy dive it appeared to be from the outside.”

A very different experience awaited those who visited gay sex clubs. Chicago’s Hellfire Club (operating out of the Inferno) and San Francisco’s 15 Association explored the limits of gay s&m play. The Catacombs, also in San Francisco, gained an international reputation for fisting or “handballing.” The 3<sup>rd</sup> sexual revolution reached its zenith on 21 March 1980 when the Catacombs hosted what the anthropologist Gayle Rubin found to be “the first time significant numbers of kinky gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and heterosexuals partied together in the Bay Area.”<sup>12</sup>

#### Public sex

Today’s radical sexual culture suggests the diversity of deviant practice and its availability throughout the country. They include both places of legalized prostitution (in Nevada) and places of noncommercial illicit encounters, including strip clubs, swinger get-togethers, gay bathhouses, members-only sex and fetish clubs and an assortment of other venues. These examples illustrate the increasing range of venues of sexual assignation available to a growing number of adults.

For the last twenty-eight years, gay and straight sexual deviants have met in San Francisco during Leather Pride Week to celebrate the Folsom Street Fair. On the last Sunday in September, between three-hundred-and-fifty and four hundred thousand fetishists, their admirers and voyeurs gathered in what is considered the world’s largest assembly of sexual deviants. While the street fair was the centerpiece of the week’s adventures, almost every night featured a special deviant-themed event.<sup>13</sup>

The people strolling along Folsom Street came from across the Bay, across the country, across the globe and from every conceivable background, including sexual inclination. So entertaining, whole families came to gawk and participate in the festive revelry. Folsom Street was packed with people for five blocks and lined with booths offering everything from s&m whipping sessions and fetish toys, to performances by rock bands and displays by erotic artists, to AIDS/STD tests and to literature on gay-friendly evangelical churches, and to hotdogs and beer.

According to *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Tom Maiolo, a visitor from Tampa, FL, attending his first fair and outfitted in a leather vest and chaps with his butt exposed, exclaimed, "So far, so good. I love this, and I'm just getting started." Another fairgoer, Jaeleen Bennis, mused, "This is like Disneyland – you'll never see anything like this in the world."

One woman, going by the name Andrea Storm, was dressed in a tiny silver dress shaped like a martini glass with bra cups decorated like green olives. "It's totally fun," she said. "I don't get very far because I keep getting photographed. I feel like I'm on the red carpet." As the *Chronicle* reports, "... couples led each other up and down the street with dog collars and leashes, men in thong underwear played Twister, women in stilettos and fishnet stockings spilled out of their corsets, and shoppers browsed stalls selling products such as baseball caps reading 'Master' and 'Slave' and a book entitled 'Dungeon Emergencies and Supplies.'"

One area, Venus' Playground, was designated as a women-only space. It consisted of one tent used as a dungeon for sex play and another tent for demonstrations. Among the

planned specialty events were "Beginning Bondage: Quick Tips," "Sticks and Punching with Lady Hilary" and "Japanese Rope Bondage with Madame Butterfly." To encourage personal ease, the space was designated off-limits to photography.

Folsom week involved a wide range of scheduled public events. They included: an art show, "Daddies and Dukes"; "a spoken word smut salon," "Perverts Put Out"; a women-only event, "This Shit Will Fuck U Up"; a veterans fund raiser, "Mr. & Miss Gay Bridges Uniform Party;" and a full-dress gala at the Magnitude dance club (with tickets running \$90 a pop). One night the Leathermen's Discussion Group hosted a "Fetish Fair" that showcased a variety of b&d/s&m demonstrations featuring "some of the most knowledgeable and respected experts in the community." Other special events included an evening with erotic performance artists Cleo Dubois and Fakir; a formal gay-oriented uniform dinner, Roll Call 2007, sponsored by California Boots and Breeches Corp.; a male/male spanking get-together; and a host of after-hour private fetish sex parties for straight and gay male and female adventurers. Folsom Street had something for almost everyone.

In 2008, for example, the fair generated considerable national attention when the conservative group, Concerned Women of America (CWA), came out against it. CWA branded the fair "reminiscent of biblical Sodom and Gomorrah." It was especially disturbed by the fair's take-off on Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" as its promotional poster. The twelve apostles and the devotional wine and bread were replaced by men and women decked out in s&m leatherwear and a table full of sex toys.

CWA spokesperson, Matt Barber, noted in a press release, "Scripture says that

God is not mocked, yet it doesn't stop people from trying." It added, "[a]s evidenced by the latest stunt, open ridicule of Christianity is unfortunately very common within much of the homosexual community." Barber expressed considerable displeasure over taxpayers being "forced" to pay for the fair in which, in his words, "'gay' men and women [are allowed] to parade the streets fully nude, many having sex – even group orgies – in broad daylight, while taxpayers funded police officers look on and do absolutely nothing."

CWA launched a national campaign against Miller Brewing for its promotional support of the fair. The campaign picked up momentum when Fox and other cable news networks jumped on the story. While Miller is a long time supporter of LGBT events, the brewer capitulated and removed its logo from the poster. Andy Cooper, of the fair's events committee, joked, "I guess it wouldn't be Folsom Street Fair without offending some extreme members of the global community." And added, "[t]he irony is that da Vinci was widely considered to be homosexual."

Folsom Street is part of an adult, noncommercial deviant sexual culture that is growing throughout the country. In its "Leather Community Calendar," the gay-oriented "Leather Journal" lists approximately two hundred fetish events that take place across the country. Like Folsom, major annual happenings including the Gay Pride Day parades bring out diverse fetishist contingents in cities across the country and the Key West Fantasy Fest that draws over 80,000 deviants. Other annual events include the more hardcore, weekend-long gatherings like the International Leatherman (ILM, Chicago) and the Mid-Atlantic Leather Association (MLA, Washington, DC) conferences that bring three to five thousand in full regalia – men, women,

gays, straights, tops, bottoms, blacks, whites, Latinos, although predominantly white gay men.

The "Journal" also lists some three hundred and fifty clubs and other organizations serving male and female, gay and straight fetishists into leather, rubber, bears and bikers as well as s&m, b&d, water sports, fisting and other indulgences. One of these groups, the Satyrs Motorcycle Club of Los Angeles, recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.

Noncoersive adult deviance does not stop at uniforms and fetish wear. Throughout the country there are many noncommercial and commercial gatherings that cater to every conceivable sexual proclivity. Some take place at invitation-only venues, while others occur at private get-togethers or are between a husband and a wife in the privacy of their bedroom. Still others are between a hooker and a john in a call house or hotel room; many others are between total strangers in the proverbial backseat of a car or the backroom of a strip club or gay bar. Such encounters often involve just two people, others may involve three or more participants. And these gatherings seem open to greater sexual exploration – to indulge in the perversions of one's choice -- than ever before in American history. This is, in essence, what distinguishes today's 4<sup>th</sup> sexual revolution.

#### Sexual commerce

Nevada remains the only state to have legal whorehouses. Prostitution was decriminalized in the early 1930s and formally legalized in 1967. By the late-90s, there were nearly forty legal brothels ranging from the famous Mustang Ranch to cribs in and around Beatty, Carson City, Elko, Ely, Reno and Las Vegas. Today, at a license fee of \$135,000 to \$5 million, there are

thirty-six legal bordellos covering the state. Each legally employs between one and fifty female prostitutes and, together, they generate an estimated \$35 to \$50 million annually.

A 2005 University of Las Vegas study found that in Southern Nevada, twenty adult shops and thirty strip clubs were operating. Clark County had approximately 100,000 registered erotic dancers; about 2,500 worked daily and 4,000 performing on the weekends. The study classified operating prostitutes into "independent call girls" (working in bars, casinos and nightclubs), "house" escorts (serving casinos), "outdoor" hookers (streets walkers) and "junior" prostitutes (inmates of sex-slave operations). As the authors note, "Las Vegas is the symbolic center of the sex industry in the United States."<sup>14</sup>

Gentlemen's clubs – i.e., strip clubs, some with X-rated nude dancers, lap dancing and private backrooms for other, more intimate services -- are no longer limited to Las Vegas. TUSCL, a website of strip clubs, lists 2,800 throughout the country; Texas (217) and Florida (215) have the greatest number. University of Las Vegas researchers estimate the number of strip clubs might be as high as 5,000.<sup>15</sup>

Among TUSCL's list of "best" clubs are Mons Venus (Tampa, FL) and Hip Huggers (Kokomo, IN). Larry Flynt's Hustler chain now operates clubs in New York, San Francisco and six other cities. Many independent operations, like Delilah's Gentlemen's Club (Philadelphia, PA), are upscale establishments, while many more, like Club Kalua (Queens, NY), the site of a much-publicized police shooting of three late-night revelers, are sleazy joints found off highways at the perimeter of most cities and towns.<sup>16</sup> However, a scandal at New York's Scores, in which the club billed Robert

McCormick, then chairman and chief executive of Savvis Communications, \$241,000 on his American Express card for one night's entertainment, suggests the clientele who visits some of the more-upscale venues.

More explicit examples of venues that encourage sexual liaisons include licensed sex clubs, a host a private fetish clubs and gay bathhouses. Licensed sex clubs like the Power Exchange (San Francisco), Peepshow (New York) and The Green Door and The Fantasy Social Club (Las Vegas) cater to a heterosexual crowd, though encourage female homoeroticism. A handful of commercial gay male-only sex clubs operate in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Philadelphia as well as a dozen or so gay bath-houses provide discreet sexual encounters throughout the country. (Comparable venues for heterosexual men, including massage parlors and bathhouses, serve often as fronts for commercial sex.) And then there are the numerous specialized fetish services catering to b&d, s&m and other indulgences operate throughout the country, often hosted by a professional dominatrix like "Lady Cheyenne," "Lady Tara DuBleys" or "Mistress Elizabeth." In these "safe sex" venues, nearly anything goes.

The spirit of today's public sexual encounter is best suggested by an exposé of the Peepshow play party held monthly in New York. It was featured in the popular weekly, "Time Out: New York," as part of a special sex issue – "Porn & Pop Culture: Art Gets Down 'n' Dirty".<sup>17</sup> In addition to the Peepshow profile, the magazine reported on the latest "pornographic" literature and movies as well as providing an historical sketch of burlesque and the birth of the striptease. For hip New Yorkers with 9/11 now only a fading memory, sex is back.

The Peepshow claims to serve as “an alternative private adult arty, pansexual, sexually Mixed crowd Adamantly fetish friendly, Bi, straight, gay, lesbian, curious, couples, singles, cross dressers, Gothic, Foot worshipers, transgender, swingers, subs of all sizes and shapes can come and be who or what ever it is that they want to be ...” Not an uninteresting crowd.

And its “rep” precedes it! “Time Out” titillates its readers, describing a couple of scenes from a recent party:

Men wandered around naked, while women strutted through topless. By 11pm, a bullwhip-wielding dominatrix was mercilessly beating a bound slave. Nearby, a goth bitch-goddess sat on a sofa, basking in adulation as her devoted slave licked her dainty toes. ...

In the Pitch Black Room, reserved for couples and encounters with strangers, a man sporting black leather chaps screwed his miniskirted girlfriend doggy-style, right next to a thrusting threesome. ...

Its “Fetish & Fantasy Dress Codes” suggests a vivid sense of the club’s intended audience:

Acceptable Attire: Leather, Latex, PVC, Full Uniform (not just BDUs pants), Kinky Drag, Glam, Vampire, Gothic, Formal Wear, as a Devil, an angel, cupid, a playboy bunny, a satyr, fantasy, Cyber, Past, Futuristic, Club Kid, Fabulous, sexy, silver, Trekker, wing's, body mod's, Victorian, pajamas, feathers, latex, leather, rubber, horns, corsets, stilettos, cat suits, candy Goth, Angelic horns, collard Slaves, Dominatrix, Masters, Dark Raver's, alternative, infantilism, Adult Diapers, saran wrap, imaginative, wear sheer fabrics (with thongs), lingerie, liquid latex is allowed at this event. Full outfits in Red, White, Pink, and Black are the colors of desire or in minimum head to toe black dress or anything else your imagination dreams up.

Every fantasy seems to be welcome!

“Master Steelow,” a sex entrepreneur looking for an innovative, profitable way to bring together what he calls “a more erotic and uninhibited element,” founded the Peepshow. It seeks to combine his previous party endeavors, the Funhouse Party, a monthly Dark alternative dance party, and the Flesh Theatre, a weekly s&m dance play party. Like all safe-sex clubs, this one has its house rules:

Single men are NOT allowed to enter the Pitch Black Room alone at any point. They must be accompanied by either a date or a person who they are interested in interacting with once inside the Pitch Black Room. A single man escorted into the room stays with his partner while there. If your partner leaves the room you leave with your partner.

No Cameras: No photos or recording devices will be allowed unless clearance before hand with promoters, Film will be confiscated and asked to leave immediately.

At the Peepshow and other sex clubs, such rules lubricate both social and sexual intimacy.

There are also countless public, semipublic and private places where men and women of all sexual persuasions gather to explore deviant intimacies. While male heterosexual porn theatres have almost disappeared, some gay theatres and video booths hold on. Yet, they do so at considerable risk. The 2005 arrest of seventeen men at the Belvedere Theater, Decatur, GA, in an undercover vice sting operation targeting “lewd sex acts and indecent exposure” shows how vulnerable are these venues.

One should not forget the dance halls, adult bookstores, highway rest stops, parks, docks, alleyways and the once-common public toilets (or “tearooms”) in which gay men and (occasionally) lesbian women as well as straight

couples gather (and sometimes get arrested!) to engage in anonymous sex. One example involves what the Washington, DC, police euphemistically refer to as the "P Street beach," a section of Rock Creek Park near Dupont Circle that has been a longtime gay male cruising spot. Additional venues of illicit sexual indulgence include the private parties, after-hour joints and, most importantly, the bars and social clubs that foster not only sexual liaisons (in backrooms), but a shared identity and sense of community among deviants and other sexual outsiders.

Finally, there is the growing sphere of "adult" specialty boutiques and women's-only sex-toy get-togethers (often called "Passion Parties") help women and men play out their wildest fantasies. San Francisco's Good Vibrations has been in operation for nearly thirty years; a "Business 2.0" reporter referred to it as a sex toy "Pottery Barn ... as mall-friendly and all-American as Restoration Hardware" and with \$12.5 million in annual sales. Cake, operating in New York and London, hosts monthly parties catering to women (with men in attendance) where dildos and other toys are demonstrated and sold. Even some of New York's most glamorous retailers are involved; Soho's Kiki de Monparasse sells a \$450 titanium vibrator and the venerable Henri Bendel store offers a \$688 silk whip.

This new sex culture is not limited to big cities. Many exurban and rural communities are seeing an increase in what is called "freeway porn." In Abilene, TX, Newton, IO, Buckhorn, MO, and Sawyer, MI, adult sex stores are popping up like kudzu. Three stores operate on the 65-mile stretch of I-70 between Abilene and Wilson, Kansas. Lion's Den Adult Superstores, a national chain based in Columbus, OH, is the market leader with twenty-nine stores in ten states.<sup>18</sup>

In Huntsville, AL, church-going women regularly stop at Pleasures, an "upscale romance boutique." However, Sherri Williams, its proprietor, has been battling a state law that criminalizes the production and/or sale of "any device designed or marketed as useful primarily for the stimulation of human genital organs"; unfortunately, in February 2006 and even with ACLU support, she lost a federal district court decision that upheld the law.

A growing universe of online sites provides people with even more discrete ways to order whichever sexual fetish they desire. Industry pundits estimate that between 100,000 and 400,000 sites are pornographic and many of these sell the most risqué, private sexual accoutrements. Adam & Eve, a North Carolina adult product company, claims to have over four million customers. And "altsex" at Google groups is a virtual cornucopia of illicit desires. With little fanfare, Amazon got into the adult products market two years ago and might be the biggest seller; it carries more than 40,000 sex products under its "Health and Personal Care" section. A new cultural landscape defines America sexual life.<sup>19</sup>

#### A new forbidden

Today's sexual adventurism differs significantly from earlier periods of American history. Where the earlier ones reflected an almost naïve innocence, today's are more self-conscious, fully in keeping with our hip, spin culture; where the earlier ones were part of broadly social, political movements, today's are very much a ho-hum middle-class indulgence. Where the earlier ones were hosted by utopian idealists and small-time operators (including organized crime), today's are often

driven by entrepreneurs and giant corporations like the giant phone companies and the major hotel chains. Today's sexual revolution is being integrated into the market economy.<sup>20</sup>

The 4<sup>th</sup> sexual revolution is largely the consequence of two critical events. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association reclassified homosexuality. It did this by revising the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders (DSM-III)*, redefining homosexuality from a mental disorder to (in its most egodystonic or self-destructive form) a paraphelia. The outcome of this decision was the transformation of consensual sexual perversion from a disorder to what some analysts' call "deviance without pathology." Thirty years later, the Supreme Court's landmark *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas* decision sanctified the right to personal sexual privacy among consenting adults. The Court legitimized (noncommercial) sexual perversion among consenting adults, whether involving a gay or straight, female or male, black or white adults. Once a mental disorder or a crime, sexual perversion has become a lifestyle. Together, these developments, medical and legal, legitimized a new sexual cultural in America.<sup>21</sup>

Historically, illicit sexual pleasure, like an appreciation for good cooking and fine wines, was reserved for those of the upper class. It was an acquired taste, an indulgence limited to the few: the sensuous pleasures of hedonists and decadents, the erotic arts of courtesans and Casanovas throughout the ages. To be fully appreciated, such pleasures required a certain skill and leisure time. While pathology could afflict anyone, only the chosen few could truly indulge their perversions.

The post-WWII consumer revolution changed sexuality. Today, anyone can

avail him/her-self of the pleasures of their choosing. This new era began with Hugh Hefner's "Playboy," launched in 1953, and gained momentum during the '60s and '70s. It was halted during the '80s and '90s as AIDS swept the globe. Today, as AIDS (in the West at least) is being "managed" through sophisticated drug regimes, a new sexual revolution is in full swing.

Surprisingly, both periods – the 1970s and today – share much in common. Previously, the U.S. found itself stalled in a military quagmire and confronted by an increasingly skeptical public. Then, as today, as war was fought half-the-globe away, Americans were overwhelmed by the gluttony of consumerism and suffered no apparent domestic hardship. During both periods, a unique sexual experimentation flourished. A new, radical sexuality found acceptance.

A half-century ago Herbert Marcuse warned that, while perversion conceals a kernel of utopian negation by challenging monogamous, conventional sexuality, it could also serve as a form of repression. His insight rings true today: "The range of socially permissible and desirable satisfaction is greatly enlarged, but through this process, the Pleasure Principle is reduced – deprived of the claims which are irreconcilable with the established society. Pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission."<sup>22</sup>

Nothing demonstrates the market's power to mediate sexuality than the attempts by religious fundamentalist to resist its ceaseless temptation. This effort to resist the commodification of female sexuality is exemplified in the attire prescribed to devout Amish, Hassidic and Muslim women, whether in the form of wearing the headscarf, long-sleeved top and long skirt or wearing the *higah* or *higab*, or the covering veil, the *niqab*. Women are

the most burdened by the market's commodity culture, even in its negation.

We live in a sensually poorer, more demanding and less fulfilling time than the '60s. For consenting adults today, the 4<sup>th</sup> sexual revolution is "freer" yet no longer (in Marcuse's words) "irreconcilable with the established

society." One consequence is that deviance has suffered, submitting (along with pleasure) to the demands of the marketplace. And at no time is greater submission required than amidst a major social crisis – a crisis in which Iraq is but the most painful, bloody symptom.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, "Your Felons on Trial in Courts," in *The Complete Poems*, Francis Murphy, ed., (New York: Penguin, 2005), 407.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Lanzaratta interview, Thomas K. Arnold, "San Diego Swings," [www.sandiego-online.com](http://www.sandiego-online.com), August 2002; [www.nasca.com](http://www.nasca.com).

<sup>3</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Jennifer L. Butler, "Sexual Masochism: Deviance without Pathology," in D.R. Laws and W. O'Donohue, eds., *Sexual Deviance: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), pp. 225-39.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Jennings, *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism* (xx ); see also Kern; Sears; Spurlock.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Rosen/83-84; Mumford/96-97; Gerber.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Allen/xx

<sup>7</sup> Allen/xx

<sup>8</sup> Allen/xx]

<sup>9</sup> Heidenry/211-12, 218-19; D'E-F/340; Rubin-1991/119, 123, 131; Stein/146; Shilts/23; Heidenry/263-64; Kaiser/244-45.

<sup>10</sup> Talese/398-99; Heidenry/175-76; [Paterson/346-47.

<sup>11</sup> William and Jerrye Breedlove, *Swap Clubs: A study in Contemporary Sexual Mores*

<sup>12</sup> Rubin-1991/121-28, 130-31.

<sup>13</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Leather and Corsets and Whips, Oh My," October 1, 2007; BAR, 27 September 2007; see also [www.folsomstreetfair.com](http://www.folsomstreetfair.com).

<sup>14</sup> Kate Hausbeck and Barbara Brents, "Sex Industry and Sex Workers in Nevada," University of Las Vegas, Center for Democratic Culture, 16 December 2005.

<sup>15</sup> [www.tuscl.com](http://www.tuscl.com); [www.thesmokinggun.com](http://www.thesmokinggun.com), October 21, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> See also Jenna Jameson, Regan Books, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> "Time Out," October 14-21, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Douglas-Brown, "Police Arrest 17 in Undercover Raid at Theaters," "Southern Voice," January 17, 2005; Lou Chibbaro, jr., "Police Seek End to 'P Street Cruising," "Washington Blade," November 12, 2004, vol. 35, issue 45

<sup>19</sup> Suzi Parker, *Sex in the South*, Justin, Charles, 2003; Jonathan Birchall, "Amazon Quietly Cashes in on Sex Toy Market: Range of More Risqué Products Dramatically Increases," FT.com, August 29, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> David Kushner, "Can't Buy Me Love," "Mother Jones," May-June 2006, Vol. 31, Issue 3.

<sup>21</sup> APA, *DSM-III*, Washington, DC: APA Book, 1987; Roy F. Baumeister and Jennifer L. Butler, "Sexual Masochism: Deviance without Pathology," in D.R. Laws and W. O'Donohue, eds., *Sexual Deviance* (1997); *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas* (02-102) 539 U.S. 558 (2003).

<sup>22</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1964, p. 78.