



# Taboos and their Discontents

BY CHARLES KAISER

The earliest taboos probably flowed from one of two fundamental impulses: the need to promote procreation and ensure the preservation of the tribe, and the desire to bring some kind of order out of chaos. Many of the most severe taboos were first recorded in Leviticus, which includes what is usually interpreted as an absolute prohibition of homosexuality. “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”

Like other taboos, this one is rooted in the imperatives of its time. The sanctioning of sex between two men could only reduce the likelihood of procreation, and preservation of the species was clearly the Hebrews’ first priority. (The prohibition against pork, a frequent source of trichinosis in the ancient world, probably had a similarly practical motive.) At the height of the debate about whether gay people in the military should conceal their sexuality, the novelist James Michener offered this explanation for the origin of the restriction against homosexuality: “One must read all of Leviticus to understand the condition of the ancient Hebrews” when this harsh judgment was imposed. “They lived in a rude, brutal, almost uncivilized place where abominations abounded,” Michener wrote. “To read the list of the things the Jews were enjoined to stop doing is to realize that God had to be unusually strict with such an undisciplined mob. ‘And if a man take a wife and her mother, it is wickedness; they shall be burnt with fire, both he and they.’ A father who had sex with his daughter-in-law ‘shall be put to death.’ ”

As civilization progressed, the jettisoning of taboos became just as important to human progress as their creation had been in earlier times. When the Christians discarded the dietary laws of the Old Testament, it proved that changing conditions had made it possible to pick and choose among the taboos they had inherited, even those specified by the Bible. Similarly, both Christians and Jews would eventually reject the biblical injunctions (also from Leviticus) to kill children who challenged their parents and to execute adulterers.

But many of the ancient taboos surrounding sex retained nearly all of their power for another 2,000 years. While some argue that Christians con-



30 he history of taboos is the history of civilization. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “taboo” originated on the island of Tonga in the South Pacific. Captain Cook brought the word to the West in 1777. But Western civilization began enforcing taboos centuries before the word was introduced into the English language.

Because many of the most stringent Western taboos originated in the Bible, those who continue to adhere to them consider them immutable. However, history suggests that many taboos had practical, rather than spiritual, origins. In fact, it was their connections to the real worlds in which they were conceived that have allowed successive generations to pick and choose among them.

Among the Hebrews, the Old Testament contained nothing less than the building blocks of civilization. Although “taboo” was not the word they used to describe ancient prohibitions, these biblical injunctions match the O.E.D. definition of the word: “To forbid or debar by personal or social influence the use, practice, or mention of or contact or intercourse with; to put (a person, thing, name, or subject) under a social ban.”

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tinued these taboos because they abhorred the liberal sexual mores of the ancient Greeks and Romans, I think it’s just as likely that the need to ensure procreation was their principal motivation.

The rise of science in the middle of the 19th century was the first factor that emboldened a handful of iconoclasts to begin to publicly question the taboo against same-sex love. A two-step process gradually transformed Western thought on the subject. First, science had to be completely divorced from religion; then, a significant number of opinion-makers had to give scientific research as much weight as their ancestors had given to the Scriptures.

But even after science had accelerated the erosion of religion’s authority in the 20th century, a third development was necessary before the taboo against homosexuality could be challenged effectively: Procreation had to cease to be the first imperative of civilization. Only then were gay activists able to argue broadly in favor of same-sex relationships. And that was only possible after overpopulation became widely recognized as a pressing problem for the first time, following World War II.

In a letter to Gore Vidal in 1948, Christopher Isherwood made one of the first modern arguments that homosexuality could actually reinforce humanity rather than undermine it. “Certainly, under the present social setup, a homosexual relationship is more difficult to maintain than a heterosexual one,” Isherwood wrote. “But doesn’t that merely make it more of a challenge and therefore, in a sense, more humanly worthwhile? The success of such a relationship is revolutionary in the best sense of the word. And, because it demonstrates the power of human affection over fear and prejudice and taboo, it is actually beneficial to society as a whole—as all demonstrations of faith and courage must be: They raise our collective morale.”

The changing nature of homosexual relationships over the centuries also improved their prospects for acceptance. The Rev. Peter J. Gomes of the Memorial Church of Harvard University points out that when the Bible was written, its authors “never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous and faithful persons sought to live out the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness and exploitation. These vices, as we know, are not unknown among heterosexuals, and to define contemporary homosexuals only in these terms is cultural slander of the highest order.”

Taboos have often been used to reinforce the power of the majority. For almost 200 years, an American taboo precluded the election to the presidency of anyone who wasn’t a white, Protestant, avowedly heterosexual and un-divorced man. In the 1950s, America enforced “witch hunts” against communists and homosexuals. The decline in the power of myriad taboos was closely linked to the decline of conventional worship. This would make America a dramatically more inclusive society. But the evaporation of these taboos would also have less predictable and more undesirable effects. From the 1930s through the 1960s, the American movie business was constrained by multiple taboos, enshrined in the code of the Hays Office, a code that sought to preserve religious values by prohibiting any film that would “lower the moral standards” of those who saw it. That meant that adultery and murder could never go unpunished, drug addiction could not be glamorized and no film could “infer that casual or promiscuous sex relationships are the accepted or common thing.” Sexually explicit novels of all persuasions were persecuted for similar reasons. But the replacement of the code by the current MPAA ratings system—coupled with the disappearance of taboos against

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nudity, strong language, extreme violence, explicit sex and almost everything else—has hardly resulted in a new golden age of cinema.

The myriad taboos of the 1950s and the 1960s gave filmmakers endless opportunities to shock in the 1970s, with scenes that have all become clichés thirty years later. Today, a full-on-the-lips kiss between two men has lost practically all of its ability to startle. But when Peter Finch played a middle-aged doctor pursuing a bisexual playboy in “Sunday Bloody Sunday” in 1971, their first full-throated embrace had what is now an almost unimaginable shock value—as well as an extraordinarily liberating effect on some of the people who saw it.

As Isherwood’s letter to Vidal suggests, the existence of taboos gives people the opportunity to assert their own humanity by challenging them. A dearth of taboos has made the task of the contemporary artist more difficult by leaving too little to confront. Subtlety is the first victim in an era in which there are no limits. Effective satire is equally difficult when almost nothing remains forbidden.

Perceived injustice is often a valuable engine for great art.

Without the struggle to end discrimination against blacks, or the movement to end the war in Vietnam, much of Bob Dylan’s art would have been impossible. Art faces a challenge when censorship disappears. In a society without strong taboos, it becomes much more difficult to create the kind of art that seizes the imagination. A dung-covered Virgin Mary at the Brooklyn Museum may still provoke a political firestorm in 1999, but the impact of that picture was negligible compared with the reaction to the nude Olympia exhibited in the 19th century in France.

That is the paradox of taboos. Constraints that attempt to strangle a society by imposing conformity can simultaneously galvanize its culture. In our own time, their absence has produced a culture in which almost every effort to shock seems strained or banal.

