

The book cover features a white background with four overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes: a lime green trapezoid on the left, a salmon-colored trapezoid in the center, a teal trapezoid on the right, and a yellow trapezoid at the bottom. Three black and white halftone portraits are overlaid on the right side: Karl Marx at the top, a woman in the middle, and a man in profile at the bottom. The text is arranged in a vertical column on the left side, partially overlapping the shapes.

STRANGE NEW WORLD

HOW THINKERS
AND ACTIVISTS
REDEFINED IDENTITY
AND SPARKED THE
SEXUAL REVOLUTION

CARL R.
TRUEMAN

FOREWORD BY
RYAN T. ANDERSON

Strange New World

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and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*

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Foreword

IN LATE 2020, while the world was on lockdown due to Covid-19, Carl Trueman published one of the most important books of the past several decades. In *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, Trueman built on insights of contemporary thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Philip Rieff, and Alasdair MacIntyre to show how modern thinkers and artists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Blake gave expression to a worldview—what Taylor calls a “social imaginary”—that made possible and plausible the arguments of the late modern theorists who shaped the postmodern sexual revolution, people such as Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, and Herbert Marcuse. It is a penetrating analysis of several hundred years of recent intellectual history to show why people are willing to believe ideas today that every one of our grandparents would have rejected out of hand—without need of argument, evidence, or proof—just two generations ago.

The only problem? The book was over four hundred pages long. And most people have never heard of—let alone had any familiarity with—many of the names I listed above. While a pointy-headed

academic like me viewed that as a feature, not a bug, in a learned tome of intellectual history, I knew that many of Carl's potential readers would not have the time or appetite to wade through so many of his finer, nuanced discussions. So I emailed Carl, praising the book as essential reading at our moment in time for scholarly specialists to digest and wrestle with, as they considered how we got here—and what we need to do to return to sanity. But I also suggested that he consider writing a shorter, more accessible version of the basic argument for nonspecialists who would benefit from the essential narrative, to better understand the historical moment in which they find themselves, and to inform the work they do in ministry, culture, politics, business, and, most importantly, raising the next generation. Carl has now produced that volume, and it sparkles on every page. In your hands is the primer every American who cares about a sound anthropology and healthy culture needs to read.

At the risk of oversimplifying what Trueman accomplishes, I would summarize the broad arc of his work as an account of how the person became a self, the self became sexualized, and sex became politicized. Of course, the person of the Psalms, of St. Paul's epistles, and of St. Augustine's *Confessions* was also a "self" in the sense of having an interior life. But the inward turn of the biblical tradition was at the service of the outward turn toward God. The "self" that Western civilization cultivated, up until just a few hundred years ago, was what Harvard political theorist Michael Sandel described as an "encumbered" self, in contrast to modernity's "unencumbered" self.¹ The person was a creature of God, who sought to conform himself to the truth, to objective moral standards, in pursuit of eternal life. Modern man, however, seeks to be "true to himself." Rather than conform thoughts, feelings, and actions to

objective reality, man's inner life itself becomes the source of truth. The modern self finds himself in the midst of what Robert Bellah has described as a culture of "expressive individualism"—where each of us seeks to give expression to our individual inner lives rather than seeing ourselves as embedded in communities and bound by natural and supernatural laws.² Authenticity to inner feelings, rather than adherence to transcendent truths, becomes the norm.

This modern self, then, is not accountable to the theologians who preach on how to conform oneself to God but to the therapists who counsel how to be true to oneself—thus giving rise to what Philip Rieff described as the "triumph of the therapeutic."³ And it is this therapeutic self that then becomes sexualized. Whereas for most of human history our sexual embodiment was a rather uninteresting sheer given, allowing us to unite conjugally and form families, the modern therapeutic turn inward counsels people to be true to their inner sexual desires. What was once simply self-evident, that a boy should grow up to be a man to become a husband and assume the responsibilities of a father, now entails a search to discover an inner truth about "gender identity" and "sexual orientation" based on emotions and will rather than nature and reason. Historically, one's "gender identity" was determined by one's bodily sex, as was one's "sexual orientation"—a male's "identity" was a man, and he was "oriented" by nature and reason to unite with a woman, regardless of where his (fallen) desires might incline him.

But if our sexuality is our deepest and most important inner truth, and politics is about the promotion of the truth, then it was inevitable that sex would be politicized. Whereas cultures used to cultivate the virtues that made family and religion flourish, now the law would be used to suppress these institutions as they stood in the way of sexual "authenticity," as politics sought to create a world

where it was safe—and free from criticism—to follow one’s sexual desires. Hence, the push to redefine marriage legally was never really about joint tax returns and hospital visitation but about forcing churches to update their doctrines and bakers to affirm same-sex relationships. Affirmation of the sexualized self is the key to our new politics. And our new language. Even what was once called sex “reassignment” surgery is now known as gender “affirmation” procedures. And federal mandates will punish you if you object.

None of this is to suggest that ideas alone explain our current cultural moment. After all, if there were not plastic surgery to create entities that resemble genitalia, and synthetic testosterone and estrogen to “masculinize” and “feminize” bodies, few would seriously entertain the idea that sex could be “reassigned”—since it was not “assigned” to begin with. How we deploy various technological advances, and how we even think about the concept of technology, are deeply influenced by ideas, either explicitly in the case of intellectuals or implicitly via the social imaginary. The idea that the will should master nature—creation—is, after all, plausible only under certain conditions.

Any effective response, then, would need to challenge those long-brewing conditions, both intellectually and culturally. Trueman calls the church to preach sound doctrine boldly, to live in an intentional and countercultural way according to biblical and liturgical seasons—to embody and promote an alternative social imaginary—and challenge the sexual revolution both from above and from below. From above by exposing the various misguided preconditions that make the sexual revolution plausible, and from below by demonstrating the truth about the human person and the body—so that there is no tension between faith and reason, science and revelation. Most importantly, Trueman calls on the church not

only to bear witness to the truth but to be a place of belonging for the broken, forming community and living culturally. Families, in particular, will need to consider what this means in the formation of their children. Simply attending church each Sunday will not cut it anymore (if it ever did). Socially embodied ways of living in conformity with ultimate realities will prove essential.

In 2018, I published a book titled *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment*. The title was meant to suggest two things: that transgender ideology was not the truth about man but was the result of various cultural forces producing this “moment” in history, and that within one generation, popular culture had gone from questioning whether a man and a woman could be “just friends” in *When Harry Met Sally* to declaring there was a civil right for a man to become a woman. In *Strange New World*, Trueman uncovers and describes the deep underlying social and intellectual forces that explain why his grandfather would have rejected such a claim without second thought while President Biden declares, “Transgender equality is the civil rights issue of our time.”⁴

I have long admired Carl’s popular essays and academic books. This book is the best of both worlds, combining his accessible writing and deep learning. I am deeply grateful that this book is his first major publication as a Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and honored that he asked me to write this foreword. May it bear abundant fruit.

Ryan T. Anderson
President, Ethics and Public Policy Center

Preface

THIS SHORT BOOK is not a precise précis of my larger work, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, but covers the same ground in a briefer and (hopefully) more accessible format. Readers who want the full argument, along with the detailed footnotes, should consult the longer work.

As always, I have incurred numerous debts along the way. Ryan Anderson first encouraged me to think about putting the argument of the larger book into a concise form so that it might be more useful to hard-pressed Washington staffers. He also generously provided the foreword. As always, Justin Taylor and the staff at Crossway were incredibly supportive of the project. Special thanks is also due to the following: Paul Helm for reading and commenting on drafts of chapters 5 and 6 in light of helpful criticism he made of the earlier book; the Institute for Faith and Freedom at Grove City College for generously funding not one but two research assistants during the academic year, 2020–21; Emma Peel and Joy Zavalick, the two aforementioned assistants, whose infectious enthusiasm, diligent editing, and work on the study questions and glossary—the latter of which I encourage you to consult if you encounter an unfamiliar term—greatly improved the final product; and, as

PREFACE

always, my wife, Catriona, whose support of my work these many years has proved essential.

The book is dedicated to David and Ann Hall for their faithful ministry and dear friendship.

Welcome to This Strange New World

Introduction

Many of us are familiar with books and movies whose plots revolve around central characters finding themselves trapped in a world where nothing behaves in quite the way they expect. Perhaps Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* might be the classic examples of this in children's literature. But this is a standard plotline in many other works. From Franz Kafka's *The Trial* to *The Matrix* series of movies, dystopian confusion is a hardy perennial of our culture.

Yet this phenomenon is no longer confined to the fictional products of our day. For many people, the Western world in which we now live has a profoundly confusing, and often disturbing, quality to it. Things once regarded as obvious and unassailable virtues have in recent years been subject to vigorous criticism and even in some cases come to be seen by many as more akin to vices. Indeed, it can seem as if things that almost everybody believed as unquestioned orthodoxy the day before yesterday—that marriage

is to be between one man and one woman, for example—are now regarded as heresies advocated only by the dangerous, lunatic fringe.

Nor are the problems confined to the world “out there.” Often, they manifest themselves most acutely and most painfully within families. Parents teaching their family traditional views of sex find themselves met with incomprehension by their children who have absorbed far different views from the culture around them. What a parent considers to be a loving response to a child struggling with same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria might be regarded by the child as hateful and bigoted. And this is as true within the church as it is within wider society. The generation gap today is reflected not simply in fashion and music but in attitudes and beliefs about some of the most basic aspects of human existence. The result is often confusion and sometimes even heartbreak as many of the most brutal engagements in the culture war are played out around the dinner table and at family gatherings.

Welcome to this strange new world. You may not like it. But it is where you live, and therefore it is important that you try to understand it.

Of course, all this cultural flux and instability is profoundly disorienting, especially for those of the older generation but even for those who are younger, as the gulf between what their peers think and what their parents believe can now seem vaster than ever. And even the more self-aware of the older generation can often be left wondering whether opinions they have held since childhood are really true or whether they are simply the result of their upbringing. Did not generations of otherwise normal people believe that slavery was acceptable? Did society not once consider the death penalty for even comparatively trivial criminal offences to be appropriate and just? Does this not mean that traditional views on

sex, marriage, and gender might also have been seriously misplaced or perhaps have outlived their usefulness in our modern, globalized, technological society? Such questions are appropriate, given the errors of the past with regard to significant moral questions.

The challenge, of course, is how to begin to engage in this type of reflection. Part of the confusion is caused by the fact that so many areas of our lives and world seem to be in flux that there seems very little that is solid or constant by which we can navigate the apparent chaos around us. Yet it is my conviction that there is something that helps to unify the changes we are witnessing and to make them, if not entirely explicable, at least less random than we might be tempted to think. This is the notion of the *self*. And the self connects to three other concepts of relevance to my narrative: expressive individualism, the sexual revolution, and the social imaginary. So, before we begin the story proper, it is important to define exactly how I shall be using these terms.

What Is the *Self*?

The term *self* needs some explanation. There is a commonsensical way in which we use the idea of being a self to refer to our basic consciousness of ourselves as individual people. I know that I am Carl Trueman, an Englishman living in America, not Jeff Bezos, who founded Amazon, or Donald Trump, who was president of the United States. Those two are different individuals, different selves because they are different self-conscious beings with different bodies, minds, and life-stories from me.

When I use the term *self* in this book, I am referring not to this commonsense way of using the term but rather to the deeper notion of where the “real me” is to be found, how that shapes my view of life, and in what the fulfillment or happiness of that “real

me” consists. Perhaps this is best expressed by a series of questions. Am I, for example, to be understood primarily in terms of my obligations toward, and dependence upon, others? Does education consist in training me in the demands and expectations of the wider culture and forming me, shaping me into that which will serve the community at large? Is “growing up” a process by which I learn to control my feelings, to act with restraint, and sacrifice my desires to those of the community around me? Or am I to understand myself as born free and able to create my own identity? Does education consist in enabling me to express outwardly that which I feel inwardly? Is growing up a process not of learning restraint but rather of capitalizing on opportunities to perform? My conviction is that the normative self of today—the typical way in which we each think of our identity—is one who answers those last three questions in the affirmative. The modern self assumes the authority of inner feelings and sees authenticity as defined by the ability to give social expression to the same. The modern self also assumes that society at large will recognize and affirm this behavior. Such a self is defined by what is called expressive individualism.

What Is Expressive Individualism?

The term “expressive individualism” was coined by the American scholar Robert Bellah, who defines it as follows:

Expressive individualism holds that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized.¹

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, too, sees this expressive individualism as the normative modern notion of selfhood in the

West. He specifically connects it to what he dubs “the culture of ‘authenticity,’” which he describes as follows:

[The culture of authenticity is one where] each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.²

In short, the modern self is one where authenticity is achieved by acting outwardly in accordance with one’s inward feelings. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, this notion is now very deep in modern culture and helps to explain a host of interesting phenomena. For example, the increasing social sensitivity to criticizing anyone for their personal lifestyle choice reflects a view of the world where each person is free to perform life in whatever way they choose; and any attempt to express disapproval is therefore a blow not simply against particular ways of behaving but against the right of that person to be whoever they wish to be. Indeed, we might even say that the very notion of “personal lifestyle choice” is a symptom of a society where expressive individualism is the normative way of thinking about self and its place in the world.

It is worth noting at this point that I am not here arguing that expressive individualism is an unmitigated bad thing. Human beings do have an inner life. We do feel things. We are emotional creatures. Those who are not to some degree demonstrative and emotional so often strike us as somehow less than human or as cold and indifferent. In this book, I do not wish to deny that expressive individualism has aspects that are good and commendable. I am concerned, however, with how its triumph as the normative self has

led to some of the strangest and, to many, most disturbing aspects of our modern world.

Many of us are indeed particularly disturbed by the radical changes in society's sexual norms over recent decades, and even more so by the rise of the transgender movement. It is my belief, however, that these elements of what we call the sexual revolution are actually symptoms of this wider turn to expressive individualism in the West. The priority that the LGBTQ+ movement places on sexual desire and inner feelings relative to personal identity is part of this broader accent on the inner, psychological life of Western people that shapes us all. It is my contention in this book that expressive individualism provides the broad backdrop to these aspects of what is commonly called the sexual revolution.

What Is the Sexual Revolution?

When we hear the term *sexual revolution*, many of us are tempted to think of the ways in which sexual morality has been transformed since the 1960s. Often, we tend to assume that these changes involve the expansion of the range of socially acceptable sexual behavior. That certainly captures something of what I mean by the term. For example, we now live in an age where homosexuality no longer carries the social stigma, let alone the criminal penalties, that it once did. Further, sex outside of marriage—indeed, outside of any framework of personal commitment—is now commonplace. Our sexual world is simply not that of our Victorian ancestors.

Yet it would be a mistake to see the sexual revolution merely in terms of a loosening of moral boundaries to include more forms of sexual expression. What marks the modern sexual revolution out as distinctive is the way it has normalized sexual phenomena

such as homosexuality and promiscuity and even come to celebrate them. It is not therefore the fact that, for example, modern people engage in gay sex or look at sexually explicit material, while earlier generations did not, that constitutes the sexual revolution. It is that gay sex and the use of pornography no longer involve the shame and social stigma they once did. Indeed, they have even come to be regarded as a normal part of mainstream culture.

In short, the sexual revolution does not simply represent a growth in the routine transgression of traditional sexual codes or even a modest expansion of the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable sexual behavior. Not at all. Rather, it is the repudiation of the very idea of such codes in their entirety. More than that, it has come in certain areas, such as that of homosexuality and transgenderism, to require the positive repudiation of traditional sexual mores to the point where belief in, or maintenance of, such views has come to be seen as ridiculous and even a sign of serious mental or moral deficiency. And to understand this, we need to see the sexual revolution as a particularly sharp manifestation of the characteristics of expressive individualism. If the individual's inner identity is defined by sexual desire, then he or she must be allowed to act out on that desire in order to be an authentic person.

Obviously, Western society still has sexual codes and places limits on sexual behavior—pedophilia, for example, continues to be outlawed in the United States—but those limits are increasingly defined not so much by the sex acts themselves as by the issue of whether the parties involved have consented to those acts. Again, notice what the sexual revolution has done: it has brought us to the point where sexual acts in themselves are seen as having no intrinsic moral significance; it is the consent (or not) of those engaging in them that provides the moral framework.

Why Do We Think the Way We Do?

At the heart of this book is a historical narrative that is concerned primarily with the ideas of a number of intellectual figures, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft through to Germaine Greer and Yuval Levin. And yet if my thesis is correct—that expressive individualism is the default setting for understanding our selves in the twenty-first century—the obvious question to ask is: How did this come about, when so few people today have heard of, let alone read, the various thinkers that I discuss?

The answer is that these thinkers do not “cause” the rise of the modern self or the sexual revolution in any simple or direct way, as a ball hitting a window might cause the glass to shatter. Many other factors come into play, as I shall note particularly in chapters 5 and 6. I did choose these thinkers partly because they have proved influential in elite circles. Rousseau, for example, has had a profound effect on modern educational theory, and Nietzsche, via the work of people such as Michel Foucault, on the study of the humanities. But I also chose them because they offer, in particularly clear and helpful ways, examples of people who reflected self-consciously on the kind of shifts in our ways of thinking, such that they allow us to understand more clearly the implications of certain assumptions and intuitions that we may unreflectively have absorbed from the world around us. But in no sense is the intellectual story I trace here a fully sufficient causal account of how the modern self came to be. As I noted, few if any of us have read their works.

So if people are not reading Rousseau and company, why do so many of their ideas shape the way we think about the world? The answer is that their thinking captures important aspects of

what Charles Taylor calls “the social imaginary.” It is an awkward term, using an adjective, *imaginary*, as if it were a noun. But as it is established in the literature, and as it does convey an important concept, it is nonetheless useful for my project.

Taylor defines the social imaginary as follows:

I speak of “imaginary” (i) because I’m talking about the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc. But it is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.³

What Taylor is pointing to here is the fact that human beings do not typically think about themselves and the world they inhabit in consistently self-conscious terms. Rather, we *imagine* it to be in certain ways—physically and indeed morally.

Thus, for example, when I rise from my desk and go to the kitchen for a cup of tea during a break from writing, I do not spend time reflecting on the physics of solids and gases. Indeed, I have only a very minimal understanding of such. But I do leave my study via the hole called the doorway, and not through the walls. That is an intuitive action. Similarly, in the realm of morals, much of my response to the world around me is instinctive. If I see a person being mugged, I move to help them myself or by calling for assistance. I do not need to reflect upon Aristotelian or

Kantian arguments about ethics. I simply react instinctively because I intuitively know both that the situation is wrong and what I need to do in response.

So when Taylor directs us to the social imaginary, he is making the point that the way we think about the world is not primarily by way of rational arguments based on first principles. It is much more intuitive than that. And that means that the story of the modern self is not simply the story of big ideas thought by profound thinkers. It is the story of how the way we intuit or imagine the world has come to be. And that involves far more than books and arguments.

Think about the sexual revolution. This is more than the result of a group of radical students in the 1960s discovering the work of Wilhelm Reich. The reason society thinks about sex the way it does is the result of the confluence of a host of factors. The pill made it cheap and easy to separate sex from procreation. In short, it made sex as recreation a far more practical option than it had been before. The advent of *Playboy* and then *Cosmopolitan* in mainstream culture presented promiscuity as a cool, attractive lifestyle for men and women alike. The rise of no-fault divorce reduced marriage to a sentimental bond. The rhetoric of feminism asserted women's control over their own bodies and sexuality. The internet massively expanded the accessibility of pornography, and, as more people used it, the social stigma it traditionally carried was diminished. Soap operas and sitcoms, even commercials, presented sex as a cost-free pastime. The list goes on, but the picture is clear: a complex set of factors, from philosophy to technology to pop culture, shape the way we intuitively think about sex. Indeed, they shape the way we think about the world in general and our place within it. And that is why thinking about our situation in terms of the social imaginary

is so helpful. In short, it deals with us as we are and not simply as beings constituted by a set of disembodied ideas. We do not so much think about the world as we intuitively relate to it.

Conclusion

To anticipate my argument, it is my conviction that the dramatic changes and flux we witness and experience in society today are related to the rise to cultural normativity of the expressive individual self, particularly as expressed through the idioms of the sexual revolution. And the fact that the reasons for this are so deeply embedded in all aspects of our culture means that we all are, to some extent, complicit in what we see happening around us. To put it bluntly, we all share more or less the same social imaginary.

Of course, the importance of the social imaginary points us to the fact that, if our world has no simple, single cause, our problems therefore have no simple, single solution. The modern self is the fruit of a complicated confluence of cultural factors. That can be depressing for those who hope that electing the right politician or appointing the appropriate Supreme Court justice will solve all the world's ills. But it also means that we can begin to think more constructively about how to address the issues we face. And that is the hope I have in writing this book. I offer no easy answers, but I do hope it provides a framework by which the reader is better able to understand, or be more self-conscious of, the modern Western social imaginary that shapes us all. This is neither a lament nor a polemic. Both have their place, I am sure, but here my purpose is more descriptive and explanatory. To respond to our times we must first understand our times. That is my goal.

And with that having been said, let the story of the modern self begin.

Study Questions

1. How have your beliefs and opinions been shaped by the world around you?
2. What differences in attitudes and beliefs have you noticed between the generations in your family? How have you addressed these?
3. What is expressive individualism? Do you recognize it in yourself? In what ways?