

## Sexual Restraint and Social Energy in Diverse Cultures: The Findings of J.D. Unwin

Scholar J.D. Unwin, Ph.D., in his seminal work *Sex and Culture*,\* draws a connection between the flourishing of cultures and the sexual norms present at the time those cultures flourished. He studied over 80 different societies and repeatedly came to the same conclusion: When a society limited sexual freedom for an extended period of time, the society flourished; it expanded its territory, thrived intellectually, advanced technologically and progressed architecturally. When few or no regulations were placed on sexuality for an extended period of time, societies made little technological, intellectual and architectural advancement ceased to expand and were at times even conquered. In short, sexually lax societies lacked what Unwin calls *social energy*.

The term *social energy* is important for understanding Unwin's work. He refers to two types: *expansive social energy* and *productive social energy*. The first includes "territorial expansion, conquest, colonization and the foundation of a widely flung commerce" (p. 315). This type of energy is directed not simply to what is going on within society - the energy is extended outside of the very country in which it originates. *Productive social energy*, on the other hand, 'develops the resources of its habitat and by increasing its knowledge of the material universe bends nature to its will" (p. 315). Productive social energy measures advancement *within* society. "Productive social energy was displayed . . . by the Moors when they invented algebra and the compass and by the Western Europeans who discovered the use first of steam, then electricity, then of wireless communication" (p. 316). Societies that possessed social energy were said to "flourish." Hence, the flourishing of the Roman Empire is descriptive of its social energy.

It is important to understand that inquiry into the sciences, development of technology, accomplishments in art and the advancement of architecture are things which only men achieve. Animals do not boast of solving problems in calculus; they do not have computers; they do not paint masterpieces; they do not build cathedrals. The reason for this is that men possess the ability to reason, whereas animals do not. Natural impulses, such as the desire to eat, sleep and have sex, are desires that both men and animals share. Men, however, also possess a rational intellect (the ability to reason) and a will (the ability to act according to reason). Animals, because they have no ability to reason, act always upon impulse. When they are hungry, they hunt. When they are thirsty, they drink. There is nothing internal that can dissuade them from acting upon impulse. Men, because they have reason, can make a decision to reject an impulse that arises in order to do something which they perceive as more important. The doctor will put off sleeping in order to study for his exam; a man will fast from eating in order to have his colon examined.

If men never did these things, that is, if they immediately acted upon every arising impulse or desire, there would be little to differentiate them from the animals. When men do not place any restraint on their impulses, they spend a great deal of their time indulging in pleasure for its own sake, and their societies tend to be built solely around the activities of eating, drinking, sleeping and having sex.

However, if society discourages the immediate satisfaction of these impulses through strict sexual norms, men will have energy and time to work on other goals which they would not have had if they had expended this energy on their own useless pleasure. Anyone who has played on a sports team recognizes that discipline of these natural desires is key to achieving great things. Men must refrain from taking breaks whenever they please and show up for practice even when their bodies simply want to sleep. To achieve things as a community, it is generally acknowledged that men must deny themselves some individual pleasures.

Unwin refers to Freud to explain this connection between sexual restraint and the flourishing of societies. Freud says that with natural impulses and desires comes energy to satisfy those desires. Freud says, however, that rather than always satisfying their impulses, men can “sublimate” those desires, which means they can direct their “sexual energy” in some other way than just sexually. In other words, they redirect the energy. Since the sexual urge, according to Freud, contains the most energy of all the impulses, sublimation of a sexual desire would allow for the use of greater energy in another sphere of life.

(Note: While we do not accept all of Freud’s psychological theories concerning man’s nature, his ideas concerning sublimation of sexual energy still contain merit.)

What do these men do, then, when they refrain from satisfying their sexual urges whenever and with whomever they please? History repeatedly shows that they use this energy to achieve more distinctly human goals. They further the sciences, produce artistically, accomplish architectural feats and conquer nations.

Presented for your consideration is the infamous society of the Romans. The Roman Empire is especially important in Unwin’s work, due to the fact that its history is generally known and accessible to the public. When the plebeians rose to power in the 3rd century B.C., they implemented strict sexual principles (p. 393). Following this political change, Unwin calls the energy of the Romans “tremendous.” They took hold of Italy and conquered the entire Mediterranean area. As a distinction has already been made regarding different types of social energy, the reader will recognize this as *expansive social energy*. Unwin further acknowledges that it is frequently posited that the Roman Empire was “at its strongest” in the second century A.D. (p. 398). “Then in their turn,” Unwin states, “the provincials reversed the habits of their fathers by extending their sexual opportunity” (p. 398-399). Following these changes he asserts that the energy of the empire declined, and that this is clear in 3rd century A.D accounts. Not long after, the Western Empire fell, and we are left to ponder its remains.

This pattern exhibited in the Roman empire is not unique. As regards the Sumerians, Babylonians, Athenians, Anglo-Saxons, and Protestant English, Unwin states:

*These societies lived in different geographical environments; they belonged to different racial stocks; but the history of their marriage customs is the same. In the beginning each society had the same ideas in regard to sexual regulations. Then the same struggles took place; the same sentiments were expressed; the same changes were made; the same results ensued. Each society reduced its sexual opportunity to a minimum and displaying great social energy, flourished greatly. Then it extended*

*its sexual opportunity; its energy decreased, and faded away. The one outstanding feature of the whole story is its unrelieved monotony.*

The idea that the sexual act is *purely* private and has little to do with anyone other than the individuals involved is, quite frankly, false. Unwin's work is sociological proof that the "free love" mentality is detrimental to society in *every* sphere. Aside from the private repercussions to individuals who sleep around at whim, sexual laxity produces social laziness, which eventually puts a society as a whole at risk.

Abstinence and marriage education, which seeks to re-instill a sexual norm of restraint, is not religious propaganda; even from a merely sociological view, this type of education has the society's best interest in mind. Indeed, when societies uphold norms which elevate the sexual act to its proper place in marriage, they benefit in ways that reach far beyond the sexual fulfillment of its citizens.

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\*J.D. Unwin, *Sex and Culture*, Oxford University Press, London: Humphrey Milford, 1934.