

THE NEW

COMFORT ZONE

Text
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SOME EXPERTS ARE WORRIED ABOUT WESTERN SOCIETY'S LACK OF SEXUAL DESIRE. AMERICAN ESSAYIST SOPHIE LEWIS, ON THE OTHER HAND, REJOICES IN A „NEW SEXUAL INTELLIGENCE“ THAT DISCOVERS PLEASURE THROUGH ABSTINENCE AS WELL AS THE EROTICISM OF LAZINESS – AND THAT EVEN INFORMS FASHION.

For many, the pandemic was marked by unemployment; it was a man-made, rather than natural, choreography of disease and death, on a scale that most had not experienced before. Combined with the lockdowns, travel restrictions, and isolation, it was a deeply unpleasant and structurally unfortunate time. As is often the case in crises, many people created spaces for change and self-reflection amid the chaos. Among them especially lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, intersexuals, asexuals and others who are discriminated against because of their sexual identity. We asked ourselves, „What makes our lives worth living?“ Certainly not work, was our collective answer - and certainly not work under capitalism. Parallel to the widespread trend, at least in America, toward voluntary quitting, the so-called Big Quit, a new appreciation for laziness, pleasure, and comfort developed against a backdrop of pain and grief. This new looseness, relaxation and mindfulness is also currently shaping sexual culture and fashion.

Let's start with sex. I admit it! In the spring of 2020, I was among those who participated in a discourse - bizarre in retrospect - about the influence of Covid-19 on human sexuality. One expert opinion early on was that where couples would suddenly spend more time together in their own four walls, there would be a veritable baby boom. However, this quickly proved to be wishful thinking; birth rates remained stable in Germany, for example. Representatives of critical race theory pointed out, at least in the United States, that economists in particular wished for such a sex eruption because, it was implied, they hoped for more babies for the nation-state and speculated that the declining „white“ birth rates would be corrected. In this respect, the desire may have been only for babies with a particular origin and class profile. Indeed, it is quite possible that the experts had white, heterosexual professionals in mind when they predicted a wave of pregnancies during the lockdown!

Far more plausibly, meanwhile, psychologists foretold that spikes of stress, death, and trauma would adversely affect the average libido as long as the emergency lasted. From my vantage point in Philadelphia, I felt confident enough to write in the erotics-themed literary journal *Mal's* „Sex Negative“ issue that „human beings are turned off right now“ ... albeit in ways that have much more to do with the domination of life by work, and capitalism's destruction of the biosphere, than with lockdown or fear of viral contagion.

In hindsight, I didn't really have much on which to base that assessment. What is certain, though, is that obsessive anxiety about the quantity of sexual activity occurring within the US population started up well before the novel coronavirus gripped the planet and inspired headlines like „Did You Forget How To Have Sex During the Pandemic?“ and „We Don't Know How To Get Dressed Anymore.“ My argument, as such, was that we were already turned off. In fact, the fashion industry announced that „sexy“ was „out“ already in 2019. But what does „sexy“ mean in this context? „Sexiness“

“MANY EXPECTED A BABY BOOM FROM COVID-19. I FELT CONFIDENT THAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE TURNED OFF RIGHT NOW.”

in fashion, they say, refers to design that shows a lot of skin and emphasizes the sexual characteristics. Officially, sex was out of fashion, and sweatpants were „in“—even before the institutionalization of working-from-home.

Why have sweatpants signified „unsexy“? Because: sexiness, under capitalism, is linked to human capital; to „competitive“ and disciplined self-presentation. Wearing comfortable trousers seems to suggest that one isn't sufficiently committed to disciplining one's body into productivity; it suggests that one's own comfort is more important. Absurd as it appears the moment one stops to think about it, in a work-obsessed, competition-oriented culture, „comfortable“ and „sexy“ are antonyms. In a better world, sweatpants would surely carry very sexy connotations: ease of movement, confidence, vulnerability, touchability, and a properly aerated vagina! Besides, everybody knows that gray sweatpants are what you wear when you want the shape of your penis to show tantalizingly through the fabric for the purposes of posting a „thirst trap.“

It has become popular of late to diagnose „kids these days“ with sweatpants-wearing puniness of libido. Already in 2016, handwringing in the global north about a „sex recession“ or „sex drought“ among Millennials and members of Generation Z was rampant. Beginning in 2010, a series of studies and surveys of European, British and North American respondents showed tiny decreases in self-reported instances of young adults „having sex“ (though how to count this was usually not defined—were penetrative acts the metric?) relative to their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Grand explanations proliferated, in the opinion pages

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