

Assault on the Passions

By Tibor R. Machan

One of humanity's least heralded traits is passion. Sexual passion, especially, is held in low esteem. Those who doubt this statement might point to the popularity of *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and peep shows. And therapists certainly do tend to vigorously champion sexual liberation. But when it comes to serious, intellectually respectable advocacy, the

promulgated a message of guilt by association so far as sexual passion and joy are concerned.

Three of these are especially noteworthy—*Body Heat*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *Breathless*. What is common to these three films is that each depicts exciting and enthusiastic sexual encounters between their main charac-



Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange raise Cain in *THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE*.

passions take a back seat to our spiritual and intellectual nature.

Lust, next to greed, is perhaps the most grievous sin in most moralists' books. Just ask poor Jimmy Carter, who confessed to lusting only in his heart and came in for a harsh round of criticism and ridicule. From Plato to the Bible all the way to modern-day feminism, sexual passion has received a very bad press indeed. Plato found spiritual or intellectual (platonic!) love far superior to the sort that gives room for sexual pleasure and excitement. The Bible is filled with sex, yet several of the major contributors, such as Paul, found it less than completely noble. And many feminists today are joining with ultraconservatives in making sexual pleasure a central political target.

Most recently it is Hollywood that seems to be waging a somewhat oblique war against sexual passion. Several nifty films, some of them remakes—just to make sure old taboos never die—have

ters. The intense desire and joy the partners experience, the intimacy they are capable of, and the relaxed abandon that they demonstrate are perhaps unmatched in the history of cinema. But in each of these films the parties to such exceptionally pleasure-filled and robust sexuality are out-and-out criminals—murderers all!

In *Body Heat*, for example, we see some of the most passionate and unconstrained lovemaking ever shown on the screen short of inviting an "X" rating. William Hurt and Kathleen Turner depict a couple who thoroughly appreciate each other and give this appreciation passionate physical expression.

Jessica Lange and Jack Nicholson, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, are no less intense in their sexual feelings, and they are perhaps even more sensual. And in *Breathless*, Richard Gere and his lover, Valerie Kaprisky, exude a pulsating eroticism as they share each other through the medium of sexual involvement. Yet

in each case sex is denigrated by linking it with the most horrible of human evils, by having the same person or persons also unabashedly commit murder.

Other movies, plays, and even music videos brandish this guilt by association also. They link sexual passion with obvious, undeniable human evils—greed, cruelty, callousness, obsession, or just plain irresponsibility. Despite some exceptions—for instance, *In Praise of Older Women*, in which good sex goes hand in hand with admirable, albeit promiscuous, protagonists—most popular drama depicts sex in schizophrenic fashion: when it is very good, very bad people are doing it. (Let's not forget all the gory slasher films of recent years, wherein nubile teenage girls are rewarded for their pleasure with an ax in the face.)

And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Throughout most of the history of Western civilization, philosophies and theological systems have given short shrift to the actual world in favor of ideals that are either outright impossible (Plato) or otherworldly and to be attained once life has been completed (Christianity).

These ideals have always been separate from what faces most of us in our everyday lives, this messy real world with its myriad possibilities. Instead of finding joy in this world, we are told to seek it in God or in utopian dreams, such as Marx's communism. The spiritual, intellectual world has always tended to eclipse the real one, at least as far as the intellectuals, theoreticians, and moralists are concerned. Since these people are trusted, and since much of what they've given us makes good sense, their attitudes toward sex have gained credibility.

In turn, another trend has been evident, the other side of the coin when mind and spirit are split from body and matter and elevated to great heights—materialism. Cynicism sets in as people realize how futile it is to try to pursue only the ideals set forth by those hostile to the passions. All ideals begin to be rejected. Only raw reality, and none of its rich nonmaterial possibilities, are said to hold promise. Materialists, pragmatists, existentialists, empiricists, and so-called realists fit within this group in Western intellectual history. Since ideals are impossible dreams, they argue, let's turn

our backs on ideals altogether.

This materialism leads to the depressing kind of raw sex found all around us today. Romance is frowned upon; those who hope for more than the simple joys of life are regarded as snobs; concern with morality, principles, and other lofty matters is dismissed as so much pre-scientific nonsense. Whereas in the idealist tradition priests, teachers, scholars, and other purveyors of spiritual and intellectual goods and services monopolized the respect of Western cultures, in this flip side it is engineers, technicians, physicians, and other practical individuals who have captured our adoration. In the sexual realm this is matched by the advocacy of raw sex, free love, promiscuity, and callous disregard for persons while in the pursuit of physical sensations.

But the materialists have not managed to unseat the idealist tradition, and for good reason. Human beings do need to be concerned with higher possibilities. They really are essential to human existence. Morality or values may be distorted, misrepresented, or corrupted, but never abandoned. Economists and social scientists may preach forever that value

judgments are sheer music, that they are arbitrary biases caused by who knows what in a person's background. But ultimately we cannot escape making such value judgments, even in the marketplace.

However understandable promiscuity may be, no one really believes that all there is to sex can be gotten from a quick job from a hooker. This is one reason the sexual revolution has precipitated a backlash: human beings need to find greater values in life, and they need to distinguish between the rotten, the so-so, and the excellent, whatever the endeavor.

But the answer is not to return to puritanism, as, for example, some feminists are clearly doing with their antipornography crusade. Instead, we need to explore the full joy of responsible human sexuality.

Neither the idealist nor materialist tradition pays heed to people as complex beings, with mental, biological, chemical, anatomical, moral, economic, social, political, and aesthetic dimensions. None of these has a monopoly on what is important about a person. As novelist

Somerset Maugham perceptively noted, a human being "shares growth with the plants and perception with the beasts, and alone has a rational element." So isn't the best approach to facing the challenges of human existence to "cultivate the three forms of activity," as Maugham suggested, rather than "only that which is especial" to humans?

A fulfilled human life pays heed to all of what an individual is and makes the most of all of those genuine human capacities that are peaceable, non-destructive, and nonaggressive. The new puritanism that seems to be infecting our culture is not respectful of these capacities and must be resisted.

We need to reject the crass dichotomy between spirit and body and the corresponding denigration of the human passions. Perhaps then our children will not have to suffer as some of us, raised on "sex is dirty," did. We must teach them that joy is both a desirable and a noble possibility. Passion is not just for murderers.

Senior Editor Tibor R. Machan teaches philosophy at Franklin College in Lugano, Switzerland.

CAN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT BECOME INSOLVENT?

"Given current trends in government spending and accumulating Federal debt, the U.S. government could become insolvent within two years. This would precipitate a financial crisis of indeterminable proportions and consequences."

—A.U. Freemarket

**BEFORE YOU SAY IT COULD NEVER HAPPEN,
YOU HAD BETTER READ THIS BOOK.**

The Illusions of Prosperity

An Analysis of
the U.S. Dollar and
the Financial Condition
of the U.S. Government

by A.U. Freemarket

This book explains why

weakness in the monetary and banking systems are taking "double-barreled" aim at your wealth and your freedom.

The Illusions of Prosperity was written pseudonymously by an investment strategist and gold portfolio manager who advises a leading international investment institution.

Greenfield Books

P.O. Box 4682

Greenwich, Connecticut 06836

Please send me _____ copies of *The Illusions of Prosperity* at \$20 each plus \$3 per book for postage and handling in the U.S. and Canada (\$6 per book for overseas airmail).

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

My check or money order is enclosed for \$ _____

Conn. residents please add 7.5% (\$1.50) sales tax per book.

the book case

The Drumbeat of Revolutionary Power

By Karl Hess

Fire from the Mountain: The Making of a Sandinista, by Omar Cabezas
New York: Crown, 233 pages, \$13.99

Campeño: The Diary of a Guatemalan Indian, translated and edited by James D. Sexton, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 448 pages, \$22.50

It is very appealing to read a book about revolutionary experiences that do not include the consolidation of power. *Fire from the Mountain* is one such book.

It is appealing because many of us love the underdogs of this world, perhaps considering ourselves perpetual bow-wows of the breed. And, in fact, if the author and his cause went no farther than this book—a good, grungy look at the muddy, mosquito-bitten, day-to-day chores of evading a national army while preparing to overthrow the government that has dispatched it to kill the author and his con-

freres—you might rest the tome comfortably on your shelves as a powerful reminder that shooting wars and shooting revolutions are just one hell of a lot more abrasive than the John Wayne movies make out.

Alas, the folks who are the subject of the book, and the author himself, Omar Cabezas, went on to wield power as the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. And there are in the book a few hints of just how they might do it.

For example, the author describes one of the first truly successful attacks by a guerrilla unit on a national guard base. "They'd never been attacked in the



RICHARD BOUCHARD

mountains; now all of a sudden the bullets were flying. It was chaos inside; they were killing each other in the confusion, and the compas [guerrillas] beat an orderly retreat, victorious. They executed several local judges. It was a fantastic moment for the guerrillas, which was clouded only by the death [of one of the guerrillas]."

It is an unfortunate but apparently inevitable result of power gained through violence that murders are regarded as executions, thus lethally stating a belief in the righteousness of the cause as superior to life itself. Such revolutions, and certainly the Sandinista one is no ex-

ception, are social-reform movements gone bloody, establishing new organs of suppression as surely as they demolish old ones.

Even in the American Revolution, as soon as a proper constitution made the guerrilla leaders, such as George Washington and even Thomas Jefferson, believe that their once-heroic work on the battlefield had now become heroic government, the steady drumbeat of power could be heard by all alert citizens as they were asked to pay taxes for the reduction of their status from citizens to mere voters. Today, as the Sandinista government treats its opposition very much in the way that the ousted government once treated the Sandinistas, you find grim reminders of the bayonet basis of all such power in Nicaraguan school textbooks that use hand grenades as symbols in practicing addition and multiplication.

Are all revolutions by violence doomed sooner or later to this sort of fate? A better question is whether all governments founded upon the absolute monopoly of violence in their given geographical areas are suppressive of freedom, even though at different levels or rates. My own and very personal observational prejudice is to say, "Yes, they are."

The second book under review here provides some evidence for an alternative. Just as the first book is (I must admit) a stunning report of the transformation of a soft-bodied, rather soft-minded campus show-off into a reasonably tough young man who got into the killing-for-cause business in a serious way, the second book is to me an altogether lovely and compelling story of a simple man, already tough in his stubborn dedication to personal honor, who, as a peasant farmer and leading light in a small farming cooperative, faced the temptations and the abuses of bureaucratic power with a marvelously calm sense of self-esteem; an unconquerable man who just wants to be left alone so that he and his neighbors can get on with their lives without having the entire weight of so-called society descend upon them like an avalanche every time some new gang takes power and becomes, in effect, "society."

This fine book is a diary kept by the