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Title

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Journal

Journal of Right-Wing Studies, 4(1)

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Publication Date

2026-09-15

DOI

10.5070/RW3.61407

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Birchers, Discordians, and Sex Education

The Libertarians in the Anaheim Sex-Ed Wars

JESSE WALKER

Reason Magazine

Long before a certain sort of conservative took to casually calling his foes “groomers,” the Malibu-based record label American United released *The Child Seducers*.¹ The cover of the 1969 LP showed a frightened little girl bound to a chair and surrounded by images of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Castro, and Hitler (figure 1). On the disc, narrator John Carradine opined on everything from *Rosemary’s Baby* to “the flaming pornography of the nudity cults,” but his chief target was sex education. “The schools of America are sex-saturated,” Carradine warned, just three years before the always-game-for-a-paycheck actor appeared in Woody Allen’s *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex*.²

Despite its title and cover, the record mostly refrained from directly addressing the topic of pedophilia. But many people today who throw around the words “groomer” or “grooming” insist, however implausible it may sound, that they aren’t necessarily accusing their enemies of abusing kids either.³ The parallels lie in the imagery, and in the underlying anxieties about a sexual threat to children. The sex-ed wars of the 1960s

1 John Steinbacher, *The Child Seducers*, narrated by John Carradine, American United AU-14, 1969, 33⅓ rpm.

2 Carradine funded his Shakespeare company by taking whatever roles he could, including parts in such infamously bad motion pictures as *Billy the Kid Versus Dracula*. His willingness to narrate conspiracy LPs—not just this one, but *The Establishment: Council on Foreign Relations*, written by the John Birch Society’s Gary Allen—may have stemmed from the same incentive, much as Orson Welles narrated the crank documentaries *The Late Great Planet Earth* and *The Man Who Saw Tomorrow* to fund his independent films. Welles clearly did not believe a word he said in those movies; it is unclear whether the same is true of Carradine and these LPs.

3 Here, for example, is the right-wing activist Christopher Rufo on Twitter (now X): “Grooming’ does not necessarily mean ‘physical sexual abuse.’ Kids can be groomed into a sexual identity, groomed into an ideological system, and, in some cases, yes, groomed for abuse. It’s a spectrum of behavior in which adults isolate and sexualize kids for their own ends” (@christopherrufo, May 12, 2022, 7:04 PM, x.com/christopherrufo/status/1524888386682531842). Rufo, of course, is playing a word game. But it’s a word game that makes it easier to raise the specter of the child molester without attempting to demonstrate that any specific person is a child molester.

and 1970s did not usually entail accusations of child molestation, but they did see plenty of rumors like this one, described by *The Sunday Oklahoman* when the Anaheim activist Jan Pippenger passed through town in 1969:

She told of another incident in which all the lights in the classroom were turned off, “wild African music” was played and colored lights were flashed around the room.

“Many of the students reported having experienced ‘strange sexual feelings’ while this was going on,” she said.⁴

That *Child Seducers* LP was produced by Anthony J. Hilder, a onetime nightclub entertainer and surf-rock producer who had been drawn into politics by Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign. A greatly expanded version of the record’s script was released under the byline of Myron C. Fagan, a Broadway and Hollywood writer-director turned anti-communist pamphleteer.⁵ (In 1967, Fagan had written and narrated *Illuminati C.F.R.*, a series of Hilder-produced LPs that became an important vector in spreading the idea that the Bavarian Illuminati were the secret force behind Bolshevism, the United Nations, and the Federal Reserve.⁶) But as the record cover notes, *The Child Seducers* had in fact been scripted by John Steinbacher, a reporter at the *Anaheim Bulletin*.

As sex education became a focal point of political conflict in the late 1960s, Steinbacher was near the center of the opposition. Among other things, he and the *Bulletin* helped spread the idea that SIECUS, the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States,⁷ was at the heart of a humanist-communist conspiracy to brainwash America’s youth. SIECUS was reluctant to respond to such attacks, and so others stepped into that role. When *Playboy* published a fierce rebuttal to some of the claims floating around, the head of SIECUS, Mary Calderone, took to recommending that reporters read what *Playboy* had to say.⁸

4 Jane Berryman, “California Woman Warns of Sex Education Woes,” *The Sunday Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), June 15, 1969.

5 Myron C. Fagan, “Our Youth Can Be the ‘Achilles Heel’ of Our Nation!,” *Cinema Educational Guild News Bulletin* no. 143, September–October 1969.

6 Fagan’s records were a direct influence, for example, on John Todd, who spent much of the 1970s and early 1980s traveling the Christian circuit claiming to be a defector from the Illuminati. For more on Todd, see Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (HarperCollins, 2013), 185–218. For more on Hilder, see pp. 200, 275–76, 285–89.

7 The group was later rebranded as the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. Today it has been rebranded again and its name is no longer an acronym at all—the group is officially called “SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change.”

8 See Mary Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!* (Praeger Publishers, 1970), 216: “It should be mentioned that Dr. Calderone herself urged me to read the Playboy Forum columns.”



Figure 1. Cover of the 1969 LP *The Child Seducers*.

And here we encounter an interesting wrinkle. *The Anaheim Bulletin* was owned by Raymond Cyrus Hoiles, an eccentric newsman who controlled a chain of papers centered around the *Santa Ana Register*. The *Playboy* rebuttal appeared in a section of the magazine coedited by Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea, and it was likely written by Wilson. And Hoiles, Wilson, and Shea had strikingly similar political views. Not *identical* views, but their most substantial differences involved topics, such as monetary theory and organized labor, that are not directly relevant to sex education.

Specifically: Hoiles, Wilson, and Shea were all radical libertarians—that is, they all argued that we should maximize individual liberty by greatly reducing state power. Indeed, all three believed that state power should be abolished altogether. The story of how they landed on opposite sides of the sex-ed fight reveals some underappreciated truths about libertarian politics in the United States, and about how those politics intersect with the more conventional left and right.

It also raises questions about what exactly we mean when we discuss the “left” and “right” in the first place. In one familiar model of the political spectrum, the right aims to preserve or restore traditional hierarchies while the left acts to eliminate them. That

approach offers one way to distinguish “left” and “right” libertarians, since some strains of libertarian thinking are highly sympathetic to washing away old rankings of race, gender, and/or economic class, while others are not.⁹ In practice, of course, the situation often gets more complicated, as when one encounters a libertarian who mixes and matches those positions (for example, someone who is patriarchal but anti-racist) or who professes indifference to whether other people embrace or reject traditional values. Nor do observers always agree as to what constitutes a challenge to the old hierarchies in the first place. Both the political theorist Corey Robin and the late historian Leonard Liggio have proposed models of the ideological spectrum in which the right wing is defined by its commitment to tradition and caste. But Robin, a socialist, assigned libertarianism to the right, arguing that libertarians defend “the employer’s untrammelled power in the workplace.”¹⁰ Liggio, a libertarian, put libertarianism on the left, seeing socialism as a centrist muddle that tries to fuse the goal of freedom with the hierarchical means of the state.¹¹ My point here is not to endorse either Robin’s position or Liggio’s—I am not convinced by either one—but to show how even a fairly straightforward and consistent conception of the left-right spectrum can leave enormous room for disagreement.

And many people, of course, do not have a straightforward, consistent conception of the left-right spectrum. In public discourse, “right” and “left” have long been highly contingent categories, shifting in public meaning as different issues grow or shrink in salience. Though their argument oversimplifies some of the relevant history, I have sympathy for the claim by Hyrum and Verlan Lewis that a “conservative or liberal is not someone who has a conservative or liberal philosophy, but someone who belongs to the conservative or liberal tribe,” and that “the political spectrum does not model an essential value, but only tribes and what they stand for at a specific time and place.”¹² That would apply to the political spectrum within libertarianism as well as the one outside it: One can be tagged a right-libertarian by being socially conservative but dovish, by being socially liberal but hawkish, by being friendly to corporate interests,

9 For an overview of these different strains, see Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi, *The Individualists: Radicals, Reactionaries, and the Struggle for the Soul of Libertarianism* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

10 Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 16.

11 The most widely circulated argument for Liggio’s model was written not by Liggio but by his ally Murray Rothbard. (See Murray N. Rothbard, “Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty,” *Left and Right*, Spring 1965.) Rothbard later abandoned this position, returned to identifying libertarianism with the right, and pursued a political alliance with the paleoconservative movement.

12 Hyrum Lewis and Verlan Lewis, *The Myth of Left and Right: How the Political Spectrum Misleads and Harms America* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 3. For a critique of the Lewis brothers’ book (and of the book by Zwolinski and Tomasi cited in note 9), see Jesse Walker, “The Left-Right Spectrum Is Mostly Meaningless,” *Reason*, June 2023, <https://reason.com/2023/05/21/the-left-right-spectrum-is-mostly-meaningless/>.

or, lately, by being hostile to corporate interests, provided you dress up that opposition with words like “woke capital.”

Yet even if we accept the most radical form of the Lewis brothers’ argument, those tribes still would have histories, making it possible to discuss changes in “the left” and “the right” over time. And libertarians, in any event, are also a political tribe with a history. That history can intersect with left/right politics in unpredictable ways.

Sex in the Shadow of Disneyland

Anaheim, California, was by no means the only community to be roiled by battles over sex education, but it has taken a central spot in later discussions of these conflicts. In part that’s because it generated much of the literature used elsewhere, not just directly but through indirect influence. In part it’s because the sex-ed fight intersects with another important historical story, the rise of Cold War-era Orange County conservatism. And in part it’s because two of the earliest books about the sex-ed wars, both published in 1970, zeroed in on the Anaheim fight.

One of those books is Mary Breasted’s *Oh! Sex Education!*, written by a liberal-minded *Village Voice* reporter and issued by a mainstream publisher. It was generally critical of the anti-sex-ed activists (known as the “Antis”), though as we’ll see it lobbed some criticisms at the other side of the debate as well. The other book is John Steinbacher’s *The Child Seducers*—a different text than the LP that came out a year earlier, even though they have the same title and the same author.¹³ This book presented the Antis’ perspective, warning that sex ed was linked to sensitivity training, which Steinbacher saw as a brainwashing technique. Breasted and Steinbacher appear in each other’s books; read them simultaneously, and you may get the sense that you’re watching a story write about itself.¹⁴

Sex ed in Anaheim was initially a fairly quiet affair. After the school district added it to the curriculum in the 1940s, it periodically prompted debates, but not explosive ones. As Natalia Mehlman Petrzela observes in her study of the conflict, the chief dissenters in those earlier arguments saw sex education as a potential source of “impropriety,”

13 John Steinbacher, *The Child Seducers* (Educator Publications, 1970).

14 While Steinbacher did not come off well in Breasted’s book, she did pay him some compliments, calling him “likeable” and “the brightest and most articulate of the Antis” (*Oh! Sex Education!*, 143–44). Steinbacher, by contrast, suggested that Breasted “felt sexually threatened” by Paul Dearth, a local sex-ed instructor, and that she generally “became very nervous around men who seemed somehow threateningly virile.” With uncharacteristic subtlety, Steinbacher refrained from underlining the fact that two pages earlier he had described her as “very nervous” when she interviewed him (*Child Seducers*, 299, 301).

not a “harbinger of communist revolution.”¹⁵ Most families didn’t object to this sort of instruction: In the immediate wake of one 1963 clash over the issue, a poll showed 92 percent of local parents supporting the expansion of sex ed.¹⁶ Nor did Hoiles seem likely to lead a crusade against the practice. In 1962, his Santa Ana paper published an article—a syndicated piece that various newspapers periodically reprinted from the 1930s through the 1990s—telling parents that it is better to “give your child too much information instead of too little” and that it is better to offer that sexual info “too early instead of too late.”¹⁷

So the district’s leaders did not expect much dissent when they introduced a more extensive program called Family Life and Sex Education (FLSE) in 1965. And there wasn’t much pushback at first. Indeed, their curriculum was soon touted as a model elsewhere in the United States.

But by the late 1960s, the region was feeling the impact of dizzying local changes. Anaheim was growing rapidly, thanks in part to the presence of Disneyland,¹⁸ and that growth in turn brought more prostitution and petty crime. Broader cultural shifts were also being felt locally: The counterculture was blooming, and so was the backlash against it. Against that backdrop—and with the support of right-wing groups based outside the area, notably the John Birch Society and the Christian Crusade—opposition to sex education suddenly surged in 1968.¹⁹ Odd rumors took off, such as that tale about “wild African music” and “strange sexual feelings.” Steinbacher and other writers started claiming that the classes represented the spear’s tip of communist brainwashing techniques. Local government meetings became the sites of long, combative arguments, and Anaheim activists took their struggle to the state capital as well.

15 Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, *Classroom Wars: Language, Sex, and the Making of Modern Political Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 134.

16 Petrzela, *Classroom Wars*, 134.

17 George W. Crane, “Newspapers Aid in Sane Sex Education,” *The Register* (Santa Ana, CA), January 17, 1962.

18 One interesting parallel between Anaheim’s sex-ed wars in the late 1960s and the fights over LGBT issues in Florida schools today is the looming presence of a Disney theme park in each fight. But today conservatives accuse Disney of taking the “woke” side of the controversy, whereas in Anaheim half a century ago Disney was seen as a socially conservative force. An earlier iteration of Petrzela’s Anaheim study illustrated Disney’s conservatism by noting its “grooming code”—a phrase that has acquired somewhat different connotations today. See Natalia Mehlman, “Sex Ed . . . and the Reds? Reconsidering the Anaheim Battle over Sex Education, 1962–1969,” *History of Education Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2007): 203–32.

19 There has been a recent spate of scholarly works on the John Birch Society. See Matthew Dallek, *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right* (Basic Books, 2023); Edward H. Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism* (University of Chicago Press, 2022); and D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).

Just as sex educators in the rest of the country drew on the FLSE curriculum, Antis in the rest of the country drew on what the Anaheim Antis were saying and doing. Gary Allen of the John Birch Society reportedly visited Eleanor Howe, one of Anaheim's most vocal opponents of sex ed, to draw on her files while writing an article.²⁰ He also interviewed Steinbacher, who gave him a juicy quote about the curriculum's alleged effects:

When newspaper reporter John Steinbacher asked a young Marine why so many servicemen congregated in Anaheim every weekend, the reply was: "Man, everybody knows that the high school girls here are 'available.'" The comment, Steinbacher found, was typical.²¹

The state eventually banned the use of SIECUS materials in the classroom, and the Antis won a majority on the local school board. The new majority then dropped FLSE. When the board brought back sex ed in 1970, the curriculum was essentially stripped down to covering the basic biology of reproduction.

The *Anaheim Bulletin* kept beating the drums. The two chief figures here were Steinbacher and the paper's editor, Sam Campbell. Campbell was a religious conservative with a Bircher background. And Steinbacher was no stranger to the conspiracist right: His last project before the sex-ed crusade had been a brief book called *Senator Robert Francis Kennedy: The Man, the Mysticism, the Murder*, which aimed to link the Illuminati to the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. (The text took in several other topics along the way, as conspiracy tracts often do. One aside casually declared, sans footnotes, that "Illuminist bankers" had engineered Lincoln's assassination to ensure that Reconstruction would be "brutal," thus "pav[ing] the way for permanent division of the races in the South . . . to create the climate for racial warfare in America in future generations."²²)

Some readers may be tempted to write off Steinbacher as a fringe character who wouldn't have landed a newspaper job if his paper weren't owned by a man with extreme opinions. But his Kennedy book was blurbed by Walter Winchell, who took to touting Steinbacher's claims in his nationally syndicated gossip column.²³ At that point Winchell's influence was in decline, and his enthusiasm for Steinbacher's theories could be taken as a sign that he was drifting further from respectability. But he still appeared in

20 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 75.

21 Gary Allen, "Sex Study: Problems, Propaganda, and Pornography," *American Opinion*, March 1969.

22 John Steinbacher, *Senator Robert Francis Kennedy: The Man, the Mysticism, the Murder* (Impact Publishers, 1968), 3.

23 For an example, see Walter Winchell, "Women of Evil Defended, Hit," *Durham (NC) Sun*, July 16, 1968. This column also includes a shoutout to one "A. J. Hilder"—the same fellow who produced the *Child Seducers* and *Illuminati C.F.R.* albums.

papers across the country—and I don't mean the Hoiles papers. The boundary between the fringe and the mainstream can be quite permeable.

Anarchists and Birchers

Despite Hoiles's reputation as a right-wing extremist, he and his writers often took socially liberal positions. In the 1930s, the *Santa Ana Register* editorialized for bringing in refugees from Nazi Germany, arguing that the "United States can use a great many more Albert Einsteins."²⁴ During the war itself, a reader opening the *Register* might see Rose Wilder Lane praising a book by W. E. B. Du Bois,²⁵ or the black writer George Schuyler asking: "If we must suspend our complaints until after the war is over, what about white people suspending their Negro-phobia and jim-crowism until after the war is over?"²⁶ The *Register* was the rare West Coast newspaper to condemn the internment of Japanese Americans while the war was underway,²⁷ and in 1947 Hoiles denounced the Santa Ana school board for segregating Mexican students, a practice he called "un-American," "un-Christian," and a violation of the pupils' Fourteenth Amendment rights.²⁸ In the 1960s, the *Register* bucked conventional conservative views on such subjects as school prayer, military spending, and the decriminalization of drugs.²⁹ It even argued that "if some do not want to support a police force, they should not be forced to do so," as long as they also opt out of the police's services—and that the police themselves "should have no powers denied any individual."³⁰

But as you might guess from his association with figures like Steinbacher, the story doesn't end there. If a 1940s reader might see a Hoiles paper publishing Lane's kind words for Du Bois, that reader might also encounter Upton Close's fiercely racist 1948 column calling Harry Truman's civil rights program an effort to destroy "the White Western races who had the energy, inspiration and courage to build this generous civilization." (The same piece suggested that the key element of communism was not

24 "The Albert Einsteins," *Santa Ana Register*, April 7, 1938.

25 Rose Wilder Lane, "Laissez-Faire Means Unrestricted Rights to Full Production," *Santa Ana Register*, December 13, 1944.

26 "Calls Racialism America's Real Religion," *Santa Ana Register*, April 28, 1942.

27 "'The Evacuation of the Japanese in Retrospect,'" *Santa Ana Register*, October 14, 1942.

28 R. C. Hoiles, "Santa Ana School Board Severely Criticized," *Santa Ana Register*, April 16, 1947.

29 Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 164.

30 "Our Belief in a Universal Single Standard of Right," *The Register*, August 7, 1964. Hoiles periodically reprinted this editorial, which went well beyond the question of policing to describe his broader views of a just social order.

its economic system but “dictatorship by inflamed racial minorities.”³¹ Conservatives of many kinds contributed to Hoiles’s opinion pages. And while Close-style racism was rare, it wasn’t unusual to see a writer take his anti-communism in a Birchite or McCarthyist direction.

So while the Hoiles papers had a libertarian ideological core, the opinions arrayed around that core were more of a mix.³² This was especially true in the year and a half before the Anaheim sex war exploded, when the chain ran a regular column by the free-market economist Murray Rothbard. Rothbard had been a part of the McCarthyist milieu in the 1950s, but he now was pursuing an alliance with the New Left;³³ his newspaper column’s topics ranged from a celebration of the May 1968 uprising in France to an argument that black Americans are “an occupied and colonized people.”³⁴ A Texas reader opening Hoiles’s *Pampa Daily News* on April 7, 1968, would see an op-ed by the far-right oil tycoon H. L. Hunt immediately adjacent to a Rothbard piece praising a policy statement by the Viet Cong.³⁵

Not every account of the sex-ed wars has really comprehended where the Hoiles papers were coming from. Here, for example, is a passage from Jeffrey Moran’s book *Teaching Sex*:

The winds of religious conservatism in the district were strengthened by the *Anaheim Bulletin*, one of a string of “Freedom Newspapers” that the conservative entrepreneur R. C. Hoiles had purchased around midcentury to warn “right-thinking Americans” of the threat from “Jewish conspirators

31 Upton Close, “Communism Showing Its Racial Face,” *Santa Ana Register*, February 18, 1948. The article also called for immigration controls, warned that “the old New Deal Zionist-Communist crowd” could use minority voters to tip the election to Truman, and argued that Stalin wasn’t really white.

32 It is not unusual, of course, for a newspaper to run a variety of opinions, but given how many people have been inclined to see Hoiles’s newspapers as an extension of their owner—which, granted, they often were—it’s worth underlining this. On July 8, 1962, to give a telling example, the Hoiles-owned *Odessa American* ran a piece by the conservative columnist Thurman Sensing denouncing the Supreme Court’s decision against officially sanctioned prayer in the public schools; on August 1, the Texas paper itself editorialized in support of the decision.

33 Rothbard was not the only libertarian of this period to argue that the old individualist right had more in common with the New Left than with the new conservatives. An example of particular relevance to this article: In September 1969, *Playboy* published a letter arguing that “groups such as [Students for a Democratic Society] represent the American conservative-libertarian tradition, while the contemporary right wing is depressingly like the old left wing.” The missive was signed by “Hugh Crane,” a sockpuppet who appeared several times in *Playboy*’s letters pages while Robert Anton Wilson was employed by the magazine. Hugh Crane later resurfaced as a character in Wilson’s science fiction trilogy *Schrödinger’s Cat*.

34 Rothbard’s columns for the Hoiles papers are collected in Murray Rothbard, *Never a Dull Moment: A Libertarian Look at the Sixties*, ed. Justin Raimondo (Mises Institute, 2016).

35 Murray Rothbard, “What Does the Viet Cong Want?,” *Pampa (TX) Daily News*, April 7, 1968; H. L. Hunt, “Acceptance of Evil,” *Pampa Daily News*, April 7, 1968.

and other subversive enemies of the American nation.” The *Bulletin* soon took the lead in attacking the Anaheim curriculum and its creators.³⁶

If that sounds odd in light of the material quoted above, it sounds even odder in light of the facts that Hoiles was known to praise “Jewish-Christian-American ethics” and that he published several Jewish columnists.³⁷ Moran cites Breasted, the *Village Voice* reporter, as his source. Here is the relevant passage in Breasted’s book:

Hoiles did with his newspapers what the temperance leagues and the Klansmen and the antievolution people had done with their rallies. He and his columnists prophesied various doom states that would emerge, they said, if the “Jewish conspirators and other subversive enemies of the American nation” (the words of David Baxter, a columnist hired by Hoiles in 1950) were not exposed or controlled or at the very least recognized for what they were by right-thinking Americans.³⁸

So already we see two problems with Moran’s description: The words he attributed to Hoiles in fact came from Baxter and (with regard to “right-thinking Americans”) from Breasted herself. But the problems go deeper, because Breasted’s passage is misleading too. That quote about “Jewish conspirators” was not actually published in any of the Hoiles papers; it came from a tract Baxter had mimeographed in 1941.³⁹ Baxter’s columns for Hoiles, which appeared for about two years in the 1950s, explicitly repudiated those earlier views. (“There was a time, when I first began investigating Collectivism, that I, too, thought ‘the Jews’—not just some Jewish organization, but ‘the Jews’—were the flies in the ointment. . . . Most of us have had prejudices at one time or another. But prejudices are like growing pains, you out-grow them and develop a well-rounded philosophy.”⁴⁰) Baxter’s pieces for Hoiles periodically attacked prominent antisemites, such as Gerald L. K. Smith.

That said, there are reasonable grounds to question just how sincere Baxter’s conversion was. He was prone to pairing his critiques of people like Smith with critiques

36 Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 179.

37 R. C. Hoiles, “A Corrupting School Book,” *Pampa Daily News*, December 24, 1950.

38 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 80.

39 The mimeo was reportedly called *Things You Ought to Know About the Social Republic Society*. I have not yet been able to locate a copy, but the quote is attributed to it in two reports by the Anti-Defamation League (“The Defendants in the Washington Sedition Trial,” *The Facts*, January 1948; “R. C. Hoiles,” *The Facts*, November 1952) and in Ralph Lord Roy, *Apostles of Discord: A Study of Organized Bigotry and Disruption on the Fringes of Protestantism* (Beacon Press, 1953), 52.

40 David Baxter, “What About Anti-Semitism: Part Two,” *Odessa American*, December 12, 1950.

of the Anti-Defamation League, in a ham-fisted on-one-hand / on-the-other-hand style—and he wrote a *lot* of columns on the general subject of Judaism and antisemitism, to the point where he could come across as obsessed even if he stopped short of saying anything overtly prejudiced. The civil rights activist Ralph Lord Roy later dug up some more explicit comments Baxter made in non-Hoiles publications, raising the possibility that he was merely trimming his sails when writing for Hoiles.⁴¹ But it seems odd to extrapolate a newspaper chain's underlying politics from the views a long-departed columnist may have expressed when writing for other periodicals.⁴²

My tentative assessment of all this is that Hoiles liked to publish anti-communist writers, that many anti-communists of the era were also antisemites, and that Hoiles could be tin-eared in discerning which writers crossed that line, especially if they camouflaged their contributions to his papers with praise for individual Jews. It may be fair to criticize his editorial judgment in hiring Baxter or in running Upton Close's syndicated pieces, but it's misleading to suggest his editorial mission was driven by anything so conventionally reactionary as antisemitism.

No: Hoiles held what was, in mid-twentieth-century America, a much more outré position. He believed in what he called the “single standard of conduct.” As the most thorough history of the modern American libertarian movement summarizes it, this was the idea that the “government shouldn't have the power or right to do anything an individual doesn't have the power or right to do.”⁴³ From this Hoiles concluded that taxation was immoral, since individuals do not have the right to go around taxing each other, and that what are now tax-funded services should be provided on the market instead.⁴⁴ He took to citing the nineteenth-century individualist anarchist Benjamin Tucker, though Hoiles wavered on whether “anarchist” was the right term for his own views. The word was sometimes used, he wrote, to describe a state of chaos or a form of communism, and he could not support either of those. But it was also used to mean

41 Roy, *Apostles of Discord*, 52–53.

42 In the same paragraph that quoted Baxter, Breasted wrote that in the 1940s Hoiles “hired a columnist whose theory it was that an international Zionist conspiracy was plotting evil things with the Communists.” This appears to be a reference to Upton Close, whose syndicated column ran in the Hoiles papers for a few years in the 1940s. Close had begun his career as a respected foreign correspondent who wrote for such venues as *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*, but by the time he died in 1960 he had descended to cranking out a nakedly racist and antisemitic newsletter. Most of his articles that appeared in the Hoiles chain were written in a way that kept his bigotries deniable—he made sure, for example, to praise individual Jews who opposed Zionism. His aforementioned column on civil rights was a notable exception.

43 Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (PublicAffairs, 2007), 173.

44 R. C. Hoiles, “A Good Question,” *The Register*, October 24, 1956.

the condition of “no ruler over anyone”—and by that standard, why, “it would seem that Jesus Christ was an anarchist.”⁴⁵

In *Oh! Sex Education!*, Breasted noted that “Hoiles said he was against things that he considered ‘un-Christian.’”⁴⁶ She also wrote, elsewhere in the book, that Sam Campbell’s editorials for Hoiles’s paper “could be approximately described as constituting a philosophy of right-wing anarchy.”⁴⁷ She did not recognize that from Hoiles’s perspective, these were two ways of saying the same thing.⁴⁸

And what part of the government did Hoiles hate the most? Tax-funded schools, which he regarded as institutions of compulsory indoctrination.⁴⁹ Hoiles distrusted *any* effort to promote values via government-sponsored schools, be it through organized prayer or through sex education. And if no school could be truly neutral in its values, Hoiles saw that as a reason to favor the separation of school and state. That surely helps explain why his operation amplified the Bircher critique of sex ed, playing up the idea that it was a brainwashing-style assault on students’ minds.

His writers, in turn, tried to bend that critique to support Hoilesian ideas about education, suggesting periodically that the underlying problem in the sex-ed debate was the very existence of tax-funded schools. (Or, in a more moderate formulation that Campbell sometimes but not always adopted, that families who prefer private schools should be exempted from the taxes that fund their government-run counterparts, “and let the best system win.”⁵⁰) This broader crusade proved less successful than their efforts to offer the Antis ammunition against a specific school activity.⁵¹

Math as a Communist Plot

The *Playboy* Forum—a section in *Playboy* dedicated to matters of social freedoms and public policy—published correspondence about sex education throughout 1969. The October edition was particularly packed, with fourteen missives on the subject, including

45 R. C. Hoiles, “Anarchy—Good or Bad?,” *The Register*, May 3, 1955.

46 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 80.

47 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 137.

48 Hoiles isn’t the only figure relevant to this story whose religious views do not necessarily match people’s preconceptions. While there was plenty of room in the John Birch Society for theologically conservative Christians, Robert Welch himself—the chief force behind the organization from its founding until 1983—was a Unitarian.

49 But not, evidently, an insurmountable indoctrination. He sent his own kids to the public schools.

50 Quoted in Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 157.

51 Campbell followed his crusade against FLSE with a campaign against a bond issue to fund the school district. That time he lost and district officials won.

one from Anaheim warning that the “ultrarightists” there “seem bent on destroying *all* education.”⁵² But the oddest of that month’s letters were the two that appeared under the headline “Math as a Communist Plot.”

The first of these, signed by one Arnold K. Ravenhurst of Chicago, declared that the author had encountered a leaflet titled *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Math?* This document argued that the “new math”—a much-maligned post-Sputnik shift in how math was taught—was a Marxist conspiracy. “Not one American in a hundred can understand the so-called new math,” the tract declared, “and yet we have all been so brainwashed by comsymps in Washington and in the news media that we allow this vile and foreign form of mathematics to be poured into the ears of innocent children by insidious teachers. . . . How many realize that the foundations of the pinko new math are contained in an infamous treatise called *Principia Mathematica*, co-authored by the notorious pacifist Bertrand Russell?”

A brief reply by the editors followed, identifying the leaflet as “a put-on by a group of young dissidents called the American Anarchist Association,” adding: “But see the following letter.” Then came some correspondence from James O’Malley of Brooklyn, who quoted a newspaper story about a preacher who had declared that sex ed would produce an “inevitable Communist take-over.”⁵³

The leaflet wasn’t the only put-on here. There were, in fact, several layers of activity at work, some ironic and some not, starting with a satiric pseudo-church and culminating, a month after the math letters, with *Playboy* publishing an extended refutation of the Antis’ claims. Most of this activity came from the Discordians, a group whose politics weren’t so different from the politics of R. C. Hoiles.

I have related the history of the Discordians in detail elsewhere,⁵⁴ so I will give just the bare bones here. In the late 1950s, two high school pals in East Whittier, California—Greg Hill and Kerry Thornley—thought it would be funny if they claimed to be worshippers of Eris, the Greek goddess of chaos. The duo dubbed this faith Discordianism, and they revived it while trading letters in the early 1960s. Soon they were drawing various friends into the gag and printing literature for their faux faith. Some of this material was just absurdist humor, but some was pointedly satiric in ways that reflected the Discordians’ disdain for government and for organized religion.

The Discordians tended to be libertarian in their politics, though the nature of that libertarianism sometimes shifted over time. Thornley, the more politically active of the

52 “The Townsend Plan” (letter), *Playboy*, October 1969.

53 “Math as a Communist Plot” (letters), *Playboy*, October 1969.

54 Walker, *United States of Paranoia*, 231–44, 257–59. I am by no means the only writer to tackle this topic; most notably, see Adam Gorightly, ed., *Historia Discordia: The Origins of the Discordian Society* (RVP Press, 2014).

two founders, began as a devotee of the novelist Ayn Rand, but as the 1960s progressed he was increasingly influenced by the counterculture and the New Left. By the middle of the decade, he was citing such texts as Paul Krassner's magazine *The Realist* and Edmund Wilson's book *The Cold War and the Income Tax* to argue that libertarians had more natural allies on the left than the right.⁵⁵ By the dawn of the 1970s, he was writing for an Atlanta underground newspaper under the pseudonym Ho Chi Zen.⁵⁶

One man who was drawn into the Discordian correspondence circle was a *Playboy* editor named Robert Anton Wilson. And while Wilson's politics evolved considerably over the years,⁵⁷ in the 1960s his chief influence was Benjamin Tucker—the same nineteenth-century anarchist who appeared periodically in the columns of R. C. Hoiles. Wilson promoted Tuckerite ideas in the alternative press (he invoked them constantly during his term as the editor of *Way Out*, a journal for the homesteading movement⁵⁸), in the pulp press (he slipped an anonymous tribute to “the Yankee anarchists” into the porn mag *Foto-Rama*⁵⁹), and in the mainstream (in the early 1960s, while writing ad copy for a living in New Jersey, Wilson touted Tucker in the letters page of the *Passaic Herald-News*⁶⁰).

There were, to be clear, distinct differences between Hoiles's and Wilson's politics. Wilson was more sympathetic to labor unions.⁶¹ Hoiles rejected Tucker's monetary ideas, which for Wilson were a core part of Tucker's appeal. And while Hoiles's anti-statism was embedded in a Christian outlook, Wilson associated his Irish Catholic upbringing with superstition and prejudice. In rejecting it, he was drawn to writers, such as Norman O. Brown and Wilhelm Reich, who saw a close relationship between sexual repression and political authoritarianism.

So strong was Wilson's concern with sexual repression, in fact, that he was initially suspicious even of *Playboy*, deriding the magazine in 1963 as one of the “merchants

55 Thornley laid out this argument in *Opening Left*, a book that he started to write in either 1965 or 1966 but did not publish and, as best as I can tell, did not complete.

56 The underground paper was *The Great Speckled Bird*, and its politics generally tended toward Marxism, not libertarianism. But Thornley still considered himself a libertarian and an anarchist.

57 For an overview of Wilson's political evolution, see Jesse Walker, “Discordia Rising,” introduction to Robert Anton Wilson, *A Non-Euclidean Perspective: Robert Anton Wilson's Political Commentaries, 1960–2005*, ed. Mike Gathers and Chad Nelson (Hilaritas Press, 2025).

58 See, e.g., Robert Anton Wilson, “Files on Parade,” *Way Out*, November 1962.

59 “The Yankee Anarchists,” *Foto-Rama*, December 1965.

60 Robert Anton Wilson, “Living Without Government” (letter), *Herald-News*, September 21, 1961; Robert Anton Wilson, “Libertarian Viewpoint” (letter), *Herald-News*, October 4, 1961.

61 Campbell, interestingly, had a history of union activism, a fact that sparked some tensions with Hoiles early on. See Sam Campbell, “R. C. Hoiles—Ideas His Business,” *Anaheim Bulletin*, October 30, 1970.

of imitation sex.” In the same article, he mocked *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner for claiming “that America has achieved a ‘sexual revolution,’” responding: “If there were a genuine sexual liberation in America, parents who bring their children up in freedom would not be subject to vigilante attacks by their neighbors, a thousand girls would not die of abortions every year in chiropractor’s offices, homosexuals would not be subject to assault and battery by every sadist in and out of uniform from coast to coast, the noodles of NODL would not continue to harass book dealers, Dr. Leo Koch would still be teaching at the University of Illinois, and young men would spend their evenings loving and communing with young ladies instead of just gawking at them in Mr. Hefner’s Key Clubs.”⁶² Sex, in short, occupied as important a position in Wilson’s ideological firmament as schooling did in Hoiles’s.

That article included a lot more invective against Hefner, to the point where it may be surprising that *Playboy* would be willing to hire Wilson a few years later. But it did, and by then Wilson either had mellowed enough or was hungry enough to take the job. His home base at the magazine was the *Playboy* Forum, where he worked alongside Robert Shea. (I am focusing on Wilson rather than Shea here, in part because Wilson is more likely to have penned the relevant *Playboy* passages and in part because Wilson’s ideological history is better documented. But Shea, like Wilson, was attracted to individualist anarchism.⁶³)

Wilson’s and Shea’s stint at the Forum has a special place in the history of American conspiracy theories, because the more paranoid letters that they received there inspired them to write *Illuminatus!*, a satiric (and explicitly anarcho-libertarian) trilogy whose plot drew heavily on both left- and right-wing conspiracy theories—and which helped inject the idea of the Illuminati into popular culture. Though the saga was not published until 1975, Wilson and Shea started writing it in 1969, the same year the *Playboy* Forum tackled the sex-ed wars. The literature they received during this episode left a clear stamp on their work.⁶⁴

There is a degree of uncertainty about who exactly did what when *Playboy* entered the sex-ed debate, as the exact chain of responsibility at the Forum is difficult to discern

62 Robert Anton Wilson, “Negative Thinking,” *The Realist*, June 1963. NODL was the National Organization for Decent Literature.

63 For a selection of Shea’s writing, political and otherwise, see Robert Shea, *Every Day is a GOOD Day*, ed. Tom Jackson (Hilaritas Press, 2025).

64 *Illuminatus!* spoofed the Antis’ rumors and rhetoric by having a character spout exaggerated versions of them: “. . . children seven and eight years old, are talking about penises and vaginas—and using those very words! Now, is this an accident? Let me quote you Lenin’s own words.” “In Wyoming, after one sex-education class in a high school, the teacher was raped by seventeen boys. She said later she would never teach sex in school again.” “In Wilmette, Illinois, an 8-year-old boy came home from a sensitivity training class and tried to have intercourse with his 4-year-old sister.” Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson, *The Eye in the Pyramid* (Dell, 1975), 98–99.

half a century later. While Wilson and Shea are often described as the section's editors, they ultimately answered to the staffer who had created the Forum in the first place, Nat Lehrman. Lehrman certainly had a strong interest in sex education: When *Playboy* published an extended interview with SIECUS leader Mary Calderone the following year, he was the one asking the questions.⁶⁵

But Wilson has said that his duties at the Forum included “writing the italicized replies in which the *Playboy* position was stated” (which was fine with him, he added, since he saw that position as “straight old-fashioned mind-your-own-business John Stuart Mill libertarianism”).⁶⁶ It is also clear, looking through old editions of the Forum today, that Wilson and his confederates sometimes planted fake letters among the real ones. For one thing, they were sometimes signed with names that Wilson also used for characters in his novels, or as pseudonyms when writing for other publications.

And that brings us back to that October 1969 issue of *Playboy*. The name “Arnold K. Ravenhurst” takes on additional significance if you know that Kerry Thornley sometimes wrote under the pseudonym Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst. *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Math?* was a real leaflet, written by Greg Hill—a parody of a widely circulated Anti booklet called *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?* The American Anarchist Association was a Discordian front group. (Maybe “front group” overstates it: It was one of several purported organizations that the Discordians put on letterheads when writing prank letters. Another one, naturally, was the Bavarian Illuminati.) Martin Wagner, the editor of an online archive of Wilson's writings, thinks it likely that letter-writer “James O'Malley” was one of Wilson's masks.⁶⁷

The next month's *Playboy* Forum again turned its attention to sex ed, but this time no practical jokes were involved. Gordon Drake, the author of the aforementioned *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?*, wrote a letter.⁶⁸ So did Larry Herron of the Alert Citizens Forum, who made several charges against SIECUS, mostly drawn from the Birchite article that Gary Allen had written with John Steinbacher's input. There also was a letter from *Sexology* editor Isadore Rubin, coming from the other side of the issue.

Playboy issued a short rebuke to Drake and a much longer response to Herron, with the second reply debunking several claims that had been floating around Anti circles. For example, Allen had quoted SIECUS chief Calderone telling *Look* magazine, “I

65 “Playboy Interview: Mary Calderone,” *Playboy*, April 1970.

66 Robert Anton Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger: Final Secret of the Illuminati* (New Falcon Publications, [1977] 1986), 43.

67 Martin Wagner, email to the author, April 16, 2019.

68 *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?* was published in 1968 by the Christian Crusade, led by the evangelist Billy James Hargis. Hargis went on to found American Christian College, but he resigned after some students accused him of using his schoolhouse to teach them raw sex.

don't believe the old thou-shalt-nots apply anymore," and he had placed the quote in a way that suggested it was a response to the question, "What is your opinion of premarital sex relations among teenagers?" The *Playboy* writer responded:

The line about "thou-shalt-nots" is a part of another quote entirely, in which Dr. Calderone told the *Look* reporter, "I'm a religious person, but I don't believe the old 'thou-shalt-nots' apply anymore." The reporter carefully clarifies her use of the word "apply," explaining, "Hers is not a moral judgment, but a description of our society." Your source, then, not only misquoted Dr. Calderone but seems to have done so with deliberate malice and intent to deceive, rather than with carelessness.⁶⁹

In addition to Wilson's comment that writing such replies was his job, there is another reason to suspect that he (or perhaps Shea) had a hand in this response: It questioned Allen's credibility by reporting that he had also authored a pamphlet packed with implausible allegations about the Bavarian Illuminati.

Two months later, "James O'Malley" showed up in the *Playboy* Forum again. After praising the magazine for debunking the Antis, he asked: "What can a concerned parent do when these baboons descend on his community and begin beating their tribal drums for a ritual book-burning?" *Playboy's* response zeroed in on the controversy in Anaheim, which it said "shows that an organized minority can ride roughshod over an unorganized (and apathetic) minority."⁷⁰

Visions of Freedom

How did these writers who shared a political philosophy end up on opposite sides of the sex-ed wars? An observer sympathetic to Hoiles might argue that no staffer at a girlie magazine was likely to take the purportedly prudish side of the debate, and that this surely influenced the *Playboy* Discordians' behavior. Someone more sympathetic to Wilson and Shea could retort that the literature *Playboy* was debunking really did misquote Mary Calderone and otherwise flub its facts, and that they can hardly be blamed if that makes the movement behind the literature look bad.

But two things are undeniable: Hoiles's libertarianism put a particularly strong stress on opposing the activities of tax-funded schools, while Wilson's libertarianism put a particularly strong stress on opposing public policies he considered puritanical. Jason Lee Byas has suggested that the "entire political spectrum outside of radical

69 Editorial response to "Reds and Beds" (letter), *Playboy*, November 1969.

70 James O'Malley, "Fighting Back" (letter), *Playboy*, January 1970.

libertarianism is also replicated within radical libertarianism.”⁷¹ So perhaps it just isn’t surprising that on an issue like this, which centers around how the government should conduct itself in a sphere it already controls, a “left-wing” libertarian would ally himself with the left and a “right-wing” libertarian would ally himself with the right.

That is a reasonably good model for what happened here. But again, “left” and “right” are tricky labels. For one thing, they do not apply perfectly to the libertarian writers we’re discussing. (Just a few months before those sex-ed letters appeared in *Playboy*, Wilson published an essay describing himself as “a right-wing anarchist.”⁷²) More importantly, writers who almost everyone would agree were either left-wing or right-wing—writers who did not identify as libertarians at all—did not always come down cleanly on one side or the other of the sex-ed debate.

The most notable example is Mary Breasted herself. Though *Oh! Sex Education!* spends pages upon pages debunking the Antis’ claims and subjecting their leaders to barbed commentary, the *Village Voice* writer’s book isn’t always friendly to SIECUS either. In fact, she discovered that debunking the Antis ultimately made her cooler to the SIECUS set as well: As the author found evidence against the Antis’ belief that the sex educators had a radical agenda, she was also finding evidence that their agenda was, in fact, too conservative for Breasted’s taste. While Calderone “was in favor of open discussion and relatively permissive sexual behavior,” Breasted wrote, the SIECUS leader also favored “stressing to young people the possible unpleasant consequences of premarital sex. And although she deplored the exploitation of women inherent in the double standard, she seemed to subscribe to the almost Victorian notion that the male sex drive was generally more easily unleashed and more difficult to control than was the female’s.” Calderone’s rhetoric sometimes “betrayed a deeply Calvinist view of sex,” Breasted added.⁷³

At a Sheraton in Washington, DC, to attend a convention of the National Council on Family Relations—the attendee list, she wrote, would have struck Steinbacher as “the master list of the Great Conspiracy itself”⁷⁴—Breasted had an epiphany:

71 From a post by Jason Lee Byas, writing as “Charles G. Koch” (@worst_account), Twitter (now X), August 12, 2021, x.com/worst_account/status/1425983470275284994.

72 Ronald Weston [Robert Anton Wilson], “Why I Am a Right-Wing Anarchist,” *the rogerSPARK*, May 1969. Given that this article called for the abolition of land rent, dreamed of a future without the employer-employee relationship, and suggested that traditional Native American societies were preferable to the US government that displaced them, Wilson was clearly using a quirky definition of “right-wing”—likely one that associated the right with individualism and the left with collectivism. He eventually took to rejecting both “left” and “right” as labels, instead describing his politics as “non-Euclidean.”

73 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 233–34.

74 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 281. The fact that “Council on Family Relations” sounds so much like “Council on Foreign Relations” would have been the icing on the cake.

For three months I had been listening to the wild arguments of the Antis. I had heard their liars and their religious fanatics, and I had thought them absurd. Everything they had said and done had increased my sympathies for the supporters of sex education. Everything they stood for was the antithesis of what I revered. . . .

But those people at the Sheraton . . . had in one afternoon chilled all my eagerness to pursue the Antis. They gave off disheartening signals of people who had spent too much time behind desks and podiums and clinic doors. . . . [Y]ou could sense a sameness that ran through them all. It was their new faith in the power of the human relations professions. And whether they belonged to the sensitivity training sect or the strict Freudian school or some watered-down version of any of these, they were, all of them, members of that large and strangely humorless denomination whose priesthood dealt out the eucharist in small tablets. They had taken what was once considered sin and transformed it into something called neurotic behavior. . . .

And what haunted me, after that first despairing afternoon at the Sheraton, was the question that the Antis had raised so hysterically again and again and again. Which was: Who gave these people the right to tell us all how to raise our children?⁷⁵

Breasted noted that while she was “prepared to accept the wisdom of certain social scientists,” she was “no longer able to trust the judgment of the considerably less objective health teachers and social workers and marriage counselors. I did not want to accommodate myself or my children to their particular standard of mental health. And if I didn’t want to, why should the Antis want to?”⁷⁶

The author was not, in the end, fully converted to the Antis’ cause, but she came much closer than she expected. “The right-wingers had forced me to think about what it must feel like to belong to a philosophical minority,” she wrote. “And then, as I examined the various sex education programs, I realized that I belonged to a philosophical minority on the other end of the spectrum. And if the schools weren’t willing to deal with sex the way *I* thought they should, then I was almost willing to say they should just leave it out. Almost.”⁷⁷ Breasted backed down from that position only because so many of the kids she spoke with said they weren’t getting much information about sex from their parents.

75 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 288–89, 291.

76 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 291.

77 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 335.

And so instead, unable to commit completely to either side of the debate, she imagined that perhaps someday someone could write a textbook that would answer those kids' questions frankly.

There was another libertarian writer who loved Breasted's book, and who deployed it while fashioning what amounted to a synthesis of the Hoiles and Wilson positions. He was Ralph Raico, a historian who began and ended his career on the right wing of the libertarian spectrum but in the 1960s and 1970s was associated with the libertarian left. After *The Humanist* interviewed Calderone, he wrote the magazine a letter that ultimately appeared not in *The Humanist* but in *Reason*. In it, Raico distanced himself from the Birchers, writing that he "share[s] very few values with them"; instead, he declared, he was critiquing "Calderone's views from a libertarian and anarchist position, seeing them as one more dreary and dangerous try at social engineering on the part of bureaucratic liberals."

Drawing on Breasted's book, Raico argued that Calderone's values were not as liberatory as their reputation. (In one part of her *Humanist* interview, he complained, she seemed to equate rape and "a homosexual experience" as events one can "survive.") He also argued, as Breasted did, that in practice sex education classes would frequently be conducted by people who weren't even as broadminded as Calderone, since "the graduates of our state teachers colleges" have "their own distinctive values, fears, etc." And where *should* kids learn about sex? From any book they please, Raico replied, but also "at parties, in bars, in johns, when their parents are out . . ."⁷⁸

To complete the ideological horseshoe, which at this point looks more like an ideological pretzel, compare that last line to something Steinbacher told Breasted:

[H]e later stated that he saw "nothing wrong" in children's becoming sexually enlightened—as long as they got their information from each other.

"I have a lot of confidence in young people," he explained with a benign expression on his face. "I think they're able to sort these things out pretty darn well."⁷⁹

78 Ralph Raico, "Against Sex Education—A Letter to *The Humanist*," *Reason*, February 1974, <https://reason.com/1974/02/01/against-sex-education/>.

79 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 149. I should note that not everything in Raico's list of ways to find out more about sex entailed kids learning "from each other": He also suggested that teens learn sex "from older women and men," an idea that sounds utterly alien today but was not uncommon among the radicals of the 1970s. (That part of the passage presumably would not sit well with the author of *The Child Seducers*.) On the rise and fall of this sort of rhetoric, and the sociological reasons why it became more common in the 1970s before beating a retreat in the 1980s and 1990s, see Jesse Walker, "A Modern History of 'Groomer' Politics," *Reason*, February 2023, <https://reason.com/2023/01/14/a-modern-history-of-groomer-politics/>.

While we're noting rough parallels, here is an interesting observation from Petrzela:

One fairly stark conflict seems to have been FLSE's goal to promote a degree of moral autonomy versus the [religious and familial] indoctrination that Antis espoused. . . . Yet a linchpin of the individualist, libertarian Antis' argument was that the sex educators represented an encroaching totalitarianism that eradicated free thought. In a public debate between Steinbacher and [Superintendent Paul] Cook, which took place after the dismantling of the program, the vocal journalist revealed this contradiction. "Most people . . . will reject any attempts to indoctrinate their children . . . such coercive force is known as Fascism." Ultimately, Steinbacher called on the audience to "reject outmoded and irrational totalitarian concepts and to begin to think as free moral agents," invoking a goal sounding quite similar to FLSE's aim: "to develop a set of personal standards and ethical beliefs."⁸⁰

Nonlibertarian readers may be wary of drawing a direct relationship between *libertarianism* and *liberty*. But it is fair to say that libertarians take an instinct that appears in many ideological contexts—a desire to be free from government interference—and magnify it, letting us see how that instinct can play out in different settings. And while libertarianism (let alone Hoiles- or Wilson-style radical libertarianism) is not exactly a widely held political position, that broader attraction to liberty *is* widely held, and it manifests itself in many ways: one day a fear of high-handed professionals telling parents how to raise their kids, another day a fear of puritans trying to suppress sexual information. Far from being confined to one portion of the political spectrum, these inchoate impulses can appear anywhere, to the point where Mary Breasted starts echoing the Antis on the dangers of psychiatric-bureaucratic power or John Steinbacher starts echoing FLSE on the importance of moral autonomy.

Recurring Patterns

Similar stories have played out in other K-12 culture wars. A few years after the Anaheim clash, another curriculum battle made national headlines, this one starring parents in West Virginia who were violently upset about their schools' supplementary English textbooks.⁸¹ Yet again, conspiracy theories circulated about the curriculum. Yet again, a liberal *Village Voice* reporter (this time Paul Cowan) found himself feeling sympathy for

⁸⁰ Petrzela, *Classroom Wars*, 153.

⁸¹ I mean "violently" literally. There was gunfire and dynamite.

families that others had caricatured as reactionaries.⁸² Yet again, a left-libertarian writer (this time Karl Hess) wrote an anarchist extension of the *Voice* liberal's argument.⁸³ The pattern recurs because the underlying impulses are still there.

Some of those patterns have been recurring in the K-12 culture wars of today. Once again, both sides are deploying the rhetoric of liberty, with one alliance stressing the freedoms of young people (in this case, young LGBT people) while their opponents claim that government-sponsored indoctrination is afoot. And once again, it is possible to find self-described libertarians on each side of the debates. When, for example, the state of Florida passed a law in the early 2020s that limited classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity, one group of self-described libertarians was more likely to see this as an authoritarian purge of supposedly subversive ideas,⁸⁴ whereas another praised it as an attempt to resist officially sanctioned ideology.⁸⁵ One reason to revisit the libertarians' roles in the Anaheim sex education battle is to recognize that the current culture wars within libertarianism did not emerge from nowhere; they have a history that long predates the Trump era, even if they are now more visible than usual.

There are, of course, notable differences between the current fights and the 1960s sex-ed war. The topic of trans people was essentially absent from the Anaheim debates, and even homosexuality was just a small part of the argument. (Quaint as it may sound today, the Antis were much more upset that kids could be taught it's OK to masturbate.) More fundamentally, the contemporary conflicts involve not just curriculum decisions but intrusions into personal privacy: Among the subjects being debated now is whether teachers should be required to out trans kids to their parents. Nothing like that was under discussion in 1968.

One reason it wasn't under discussion, of course, is because the wider society was much less accepting of sexual minorities. If a student started adopting a different gender identity during school hours in 1968, everyone involved would expect a call home.

But think about how that transformation happened. Think about how *all* these transformations happened—why it would be virtually incomprehensible back then that a kid could start a gender transition without their parents knowing, and why it sounds

82 Paul Cowan, "Holy War in West Virginia: A Fight Over America's Future," *Village Voice* (New York City), December 4, 1974.

83 Karl Hess, "Not Going by the Book," *Inquiry*, December 5, 1977.

84 See, for example, the August/September 2022 issue of *Reason*, dubbed "The Banned Books Issue."

85 In Florida, for example, the Mises Caucus—a right-wing faction within the Libertarian Party—expressed sympathy for the forces pushing for such bills, even as it argued that those laws could not salvage the schools: "Parents: Even if the Florida state forbids [its] educators from teaching degeneracy, there will be rouge [*sic*] groups who will seek opportunities to mold your children. Get your kids out of government schools. It is not worth the risk." Post by Florida Mises Caucus (@FLMisesCaucus), X, March 7, 2023, x.com/FLMisesCaucus/status/1636725790808088577.

strange today that a tolerant attitude toward masturbation could cause a political scandal. Think about the fact that even Mary Breasted, the *Village Voice* feminist, was taken aback when a man told her his “private theory” that “rape was not merely accomplished by violence but occurred whenever a woman was taken against her will. It was possible, he thought, for a man to rape his wife.” That is an entirely mainstream view today, but back then it prompted Breasted to write, “An interesting notion, no doubt, but not strictly semantically correct.”⁸⁶ Think of all the changes in sexual mores between 1968 and now, in areas from divorce to lesbianism. How many of them were driven by school sex-ed classes?

I would not claim those classes played no role *at all*. But they look like a lagging indicator—not a force that launched big social changes, but a place that eventually came to reflect the social changes happening elsewhere. In the theater of politics, they were the main event; in the grander sweep of social change, they were a sideshow.

Sex education classes were a convenient scapegoat for people concerned about the changes swelling across the country, and the alleged communist-humanist-SIECUS conspiracy was a convenient scapegoat for people concerned about sex education classes. But the culture outpaced the schools rather than the schools setting the pace for the culture. We’ll see how this era’s battles resolve themselves, as different Americans gradually adjust their visions of what freedom demands.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Eliah Bures, Tom Jackson, Kelly Jones, Gabriel Kennedy, Marco Meyer, Richard Rasa, Larry Rosenthal, and two anonymous outside readers for their comments on earlier iterations of this essay.

86 Breasted, *Oh! Sex Education!*, 86.