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Ashanti Alston, Liz Highleyman, Nadid W.
NO! Against Adult Supremacy — Vol. 12

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NO! Against Adult Supremacy — Vol. 12

Ashanti Alston, Liz Highleyman, Nadid W.

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I Am Nahid

Nahid W.

I am Nahid
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I rise out of the black ocean
and become the desire of the nations
I dream
of knowledge for the children of my country
I dream
of equal rights for the women of my nation
I dream of a peaceful land
War and terrorists
invade my dreams,
kill me, cut me apart
but I know that the stars will rise
as I rise out of the black ocean
and become the desire of the nations
I am the light of the world
I am Nahid

The Psychological Dimension of Revolution (Excerpt)

Ashanti Alston

I had a typical upbringing where the inner-city was Niggertown with all the customs and traditions of racism, sexism and powerlessness. You come into this kind of world ignorant but increasingly learning about people, society, roles and duties. You recognize the supreme authority of the Whites, of the rich and "God," of the police in the streets. Of the preachers and teachers in the churches and schools, and of the parents and older folks in the home and neighborhood.

Though my first authority figures were my parents (and older brothers and sisters) I soon found out that beyond the world of home, there were others in authoritarian positions over me. But whatever or whoever the authority, the cultural lesson that tied it all together was the one that began in the home: "Respect and obey your parents! Do as we say. we know how to raise you." Disrespect and disobedience was not to be tolerated. Funny, you didn't like it as a child, yet you found yourself following the same customs and traditions when you were in the role as parent, as an authority. It made your life as a child miserable in many respects with the roles and chores, the do's and don'ts and all. But, it was said to be necessary if you were going to fit in and make it in this society.

No child just automatically conforms to such authoritarian raising, such methods. There is naturally rebellion and resistance. But you are just a child, weak and dependent upon those around you to "prepare" you for the real world. So what can you do but eventually

submit, conform to their social designs? I am certain that I had to learn through this process of instilling fear in me, to cement each lesson in my soul. Not like I got it much, but I didn't like to get my butt whooped, didn't like to be shouted at, threatened, ordered to stay in the house away from friends and games and all. They were upset with my natural wild zest for life and mostly, all of their measures were designed to restrict it, that "wild zest." I didn't know but it was obvious that I had ongoing choices to make to please them, whether I liked it or not. Mama knows best – Papa knows best … but I didn't know a dam thing! Hell, I guess that I was just suppose to go along with the program. It was no question that when I did, it brought more rewards than punishment, and when faced with a choice between the two, man, you get tired of punishment! Without ever fully understanding why, you come to realize that the things you truly want, desire to do, think, say, feel … have got to be repressed, hidden and if done at all, done on the sly. Just can't be you. Why?

Once those customs and traditions become a part of a person they form a psychological mask quite unknowingly to the person. You come to don that mask reluctantly, as your every physical, mental and emotional fiber resists. But once its fastened on your face, on your soul, it functions just like your heart pumps blood, lungs air, or stomach digest food. You forget about, or repress the memories of, the traumatic experiences which created the mask, and go on through life not even realizing that it governs, influences, pulls and jerks your every physical, emotional and intellectual activity. It effectively cuts you off from being in direct touch with your true feelings, with your spontaneous contact with the outside world, with friends, with your energy, and with your curiosity about life in general.

Poor child has no idea that its dependency upon those who raise him/her is gonna cost him/her that natural, playful, soulful zest for life; its psychic and biological health and development twisted and suffocated by a series of traumatic experiences de-

which is to say respectfully of others and themselves, skillfully in body and heart, morally as lovers, friends, and citizens."

particularly when ‘children’ include everyone from birth to eighteen,” she writes. Indeed, Levine finds such an idea reminiscent of the now discredited dogma — held by both social conservatives and some feminists — that women, too, were paragons of innocence who did not experience desire, required protection, and were not truly capable of consent. And how, she wonders, has it come to pass that “it is only in the area of violent criminal activity that children (some as young as 11) are considered fully mature”? How can we expect children and teens to learn about healthy sex and relationships if they cannot experiment and explore, with access to increasing information, freedom, and responsibility as they get older?

How can we hope that young people who have received abstinence-only sex education, been shielded from sexually explicit material in the media and on the Internet, been deprived of non-sexual touch from adults, and had no opportunity for sexual play with their peers will magically transform into worldly, responsible, sexually healthy adults upon attaining the age of majority (whatever that happens to be wherever they live)? Experts agree that most young people engage in sex by the end of their teens. Clearly, attempts to prevent sex by withholding knowledge have been ineffectual in achieving that goal, but they have impeded efforts to prevent unwanted pregnancy, AIDS and other problems associated with sexual ignorance.

The idea that young people must never have — or even hear much about — sex makes it difficult to teach them about the differences between consensual and nonconsensual sex, between healthy and exploitative sex, between safe and unsafe sex.

“If sexual expertise is expected of adults, the rudiments must be taught to children,” insists Levine. “If educators want to be credible about sexual responsibility, they have to be forthright about sexual joy. If parents want their kids to be happy now and later, it is their duty, and should be their delight, to help them learn to love well,

signed and invoked in the name of God and the American way and good child-rearing practices to produce a powerless, dependent, fearful, self-enslaving, law-abiding citizens (first- and second-class). It’s sad that parents don’t see the real damage they inflect on their children in their rearing methods, but the end-result always show in the inability of people in general to govern their own lives without an authoritarian figure hovering over them; it shows in their apathy, hopelessness and feelings of insignificance.

After the coup d’etat of the family institution over the natural freedom and aliveness of the child, that child is trained into an adulthood in which it will continue to repress freedom (its full human developmental capacities) and continue the whole process anew in its offspring. What was done to your parents in childhood, they did to you, and you, in turn, do it to yours. And so on, never thinking about the harmful consequences of blindly carrying on traditions which distort our humanity. It is here, though, and in this way of words and behavior, that the sexism, racism, capitalism, the religious, intellectual and moral belief systems, as well as the lying, dishonesty, irresponsibility, emotional denial, liberalism, manipulation, egotism, slavishness, etc., are taught and passed on.

In sociology the process itself is called “socialization” or “enculturation.” The object is to “civilize” the child and keep everyone bind to the traps of tradition and belief. But what it amounts to is a vast suppression of the force or fire of life within the child or population in general, because it is that “fire” which rebels against any kind of oppressive socialization which is not in harmony with the free development of a human being’s potential for healthy, satisfying love, work and knowledge. What is wanted is a well-behaved, obedient, productive person who will not disturb nor question the established authoritarian order, but will merely carry on as proscribed and arranged for generations.

Generally, there is one brief period in the human development cycle where we are, relatively, free; when the culture has not yet restricted, twisted, or distorted the natural, spontaneous living ex-

pressions of a thinking, feeling and doing human being. This period is from birth to 3, 4 or 5 years old. The child is "born free". This is when our emotional, physical and mental energies are most delightfully burning, most alive, vibrant, responsive, honest, curious, sensuous, logical rational and crazy. You fear not new things or people; you fear not adventure or trying new activities; you don't become stuck in anxieties or depressive moods; nor worry about what others think about you. You are open, receptive and geared to nothing else but Life itself and all its pleasure and struggle. You are just a wellspring of energy to love, to learn and to act.

Every day, every minute and every experience in the life of a child is one of curiosity and a powerful drive to learn … about things, people, self. Those eyes are bright, observant. Those hands and arms, legs and feet are moving and touching, reaching. That child, every child – a natural explorer! Eyes, mouth, ears, hands, senses. Not only does s/he learn and do from seeing, hearing, touching, feeling, tasting the objects of its surrounding reality. They also learn about themselves and the use of the capacities of eyes, ears, hands, legs, feet, tongue, muscles, sexual organs, thinking and feeling and the whole "humanimal" range. In other words, they are on the road – naturally – to self-discovery, in its totality and on his/her own terms. Self and surroundings are one. But…

These days or years of "born freedom" are not going to last long in our culture. Our society is not geared nor interested in nurturing human development on the basis of natural freedom. It is geared to develop us on the basis of authority – class, race, sex, age, etc. The need to obey, rather than the need to be, is the over-riding concern. This is what makes "childhood" as we had it imposed on us, an oppressive institution. Good ol' western, U.S. childrearing is an innocent appearing, good intentioned fire extinguisher used to put out a fine, sweet, bright and wildly burning human flame, in the person of an uncivilized, unadulterated child. And let it be said again and again, so that there'll be no misunderstanding: The ground-

leave and, if they choose to stay home longer with the kids, social welfare benefits to subsidize that important work. While protecting children, the Dutch (and other Europeans) do not infantilize them."

The child welfare issue has been all but neglected in the controversy surrounding Harmful to Minors. Today in the U.S. the poverty rate stands at over 10 percent, with children making up an increasing proportion of the poor. In the only developed nation that does not provide universal health care, some 11 million children under age 18 are uninsured. A fifth of American women get no prenatal care, and the U.S. infant mortality rate lags behind that of twenty other industrialized countries. And virtually every sex-related problem, from AIDS to incest, is correlated with poverty. It is these conditions, argues Levine — not pedophiles or pornography — that are truly harming young people. "Poor people aren't less moral than rich people," Levine writes. "But poverty, like sex, is a phenomenon rooted in moral priorities, a result of deliberate fiscal and social policies that obstruct the fair distribution of health, education, and wealth in a wealthy country. The result, often, is an unfair distribution of sexual health and happiness, too."

Nevertheless, according to a 1997 Public Agenda survey, Americans persist in defining sex-related problems as moral rather than material, and thus focusing on solutions that are "character building, not situation bettering." Levine's conclusion that "economic security is necessary for sexual safety" aims at the heart of the religious right's agenda of privatization, parental rights, and consolidation of the authority of the nuclear family over the interests of society and the needs of the younger generation. But such misplaced priorities are nothing new: In the late 19th century, as industrialization drove children into the factories, moralistic adults worried about saving them from sex. From Levine's point of view, children are not the property of their parents and must be treated as citizens in their own right.

"Legally designating a class of people categorically unable to consent to sexual relations is not the best way to protect children,

As lesbian syndicated columnist Paula Martinac recently wrote, the differences of opinion between gay men and lesbians regarding adult-youth sexuality represent an ongoing rift within the gay community. Mainstream gay and lesbian groups understandably wish to disassociate themselves from sordid accusations of pedophilia — and correctly point out that the vast majority of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by heterosexual men — but they cannot so easily distance the community from its long history of gay icons who have spoken and written positively about adult-teen relationships.

As for abstinence-only education, young people in Western European countries where children receive comprehensive sex education and where sex is treated as a normal and healthy part of life do not experience more sex-related pathology. Quite the contrary, according to The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior published last year by the Department of Health and Human Services, other Western countries have lower rates of teen pregnancy, abortion, sexually transmitted disease, AIDS, rape, incest and child abuse than the U.S.

Levine has taken considerable heat for holding up as a "good model" the Netherlands' age of consent law, under which young people ages 12–16 can legally consent to sex with older people who are not parents or authority figures, but under which charges can be brought if teens or their parents (with the Approval of the Council for the Protection of Children) believe the young person is being exploited. But her support for the Dutch law cannot be taken out of the context of that country's social welfare system and relaxed cultural attitudes about sex. "In the Netherlands, children are respected as citizens with rights like everyone else, to housing, health care, good day care, school, and college," Levine told AlterNet. "They get sexuality education from the get-go, condoms are available in vending machines everywhere, abortion is free from the national health service, their parents receive generous parental

breakers, the spirit-breakers or foundation builders of this pillar of psychological loyalty to the social system is the family. Parents, brothers, sisters and other relevant figures tied to your immediate surroundings.

It is not that the child must not be taught or "raised" – it is the why's and how's and what actual characteristics are being produced in us by our addiction to the traditions and beliefs that keep them alive. We are born into a society which has been in existence for several hundred years, complete with its own established way of life, life philosophy and institutions for perpetuating its existence via education and other political power institutions. Its basic ways and beliefs, as in terms of sexual and class relationships – the why's and how's – have roots going back 6 to 10 thousand years. One insignificant, tiny baby, coming into the world knowing nothing of it and at the complete mercy of other people to care for it, cannot contend with society's tremendous and awe-some cultural forces.

Whether conscious of it or not, the person accustomed to, and receptive to , the society's authoritarian beliefs and traditions, does not normally challenge her/himself to affirm those "anti-social" deeply-felt feelings or longings for unadulterated life. The beliefs and traditions do not challenge the person to consciously allow his/her sexual, emotional, intellectual and physical seeds to develop in a more natural, less culturally oppressive way. And it is rare the person who will allow the rebel fire of life within to be channeled into the human developmental forms that are indicative of personal and social freedom, consciousness, responsibility and happiness. It is even rarer the person who will know how to follow the faintest or strongest inklings and desires to be free or change the circumstances of life as s/he knows or has known it.

The reason why even revolutionaries -or sincere-meaning people who get involved with movements – cannot change their social circumstances is because they do not recognize or just deny the existence of powerful unconscious, self-enslaving emotional habits, thought patterns and defense-mechanisms within them that over-

whelms the best and most righteous of intentions and endeavors to change society. This is the inner social dynamic of the mask whose function it is to frustrate and repress the vast potential of each and every human being to be free and wholly alive.

It starts with such seemingly meaningless things as feeding and teaching the child to "cooperate"; cleaning or bathing and teaching the child to be still and "cooperate"; peepeeing and dodoing and potty-training the child; teaching the child one perspective of life – yours; teaching sexist, racist and other shit whose message is to be "loyal" to Authority. It is here that the saying "Action speaks louder than words" is relevant. The overt and subtle messages come across to the memory more through people's actions, their behavior. For example, parents don't sit a child down and actually say, "You are the inferior one because of your age, sex, and race." It is given from the daily behavior of parents and significant others. Again, it is not that the child must not be raised or taught – it is the why and how behind it.

The infant can naturally signal hunger and should have her hunger satisfied then. But Mama, many times, ignores this and forces the baby to comply with what's convenient for Mama, or with some so-called scientifically worked out time schedule for feeding. When this happens the baby is being put through some heavy trauma. That baby is not "scientific" nor so rigid. S/he is an organism of natural rhythm and needs, of harmonious instincts and pure feelings. The authoritarian manner of forcing a child to comply, to conform, to submit to a rigid schedule instead of its natural rhythm and signaling, or to force him/her to eat when they're not hungry, or to strap a child to a high-chair and let him sit there until he "learns" how to eat civilized, is cruel punishment. But even in this example, it is done supposedly on the child's behalf – for the child's own good.

To teach us to repress ourselves in the name of respect and obedience to authority (parents, preachers, teachers, principals, police, politicians, etc) dehumanizes us. If a child is forbidden to

reveal. Harmful to Minors offers a plethora of findings, from studies showing that exposure to sexually explicit images does not harm children, to evidence that teens' sexual relationships with adults are not uniformly devastating, to research on the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only education in delaying sexual activity. But more crucial than research is listening to what children and teens have to say about their own experiences, honestly acknowledging our own experiences at those ages, and applying a healthy dose of common sense. While we are constantly reminded of the importance of believing young people's allegations of coercion and abuse, too often we give considerably less credence to their avowals of consent and pleasure.

Most of us came across sexual images in our youth, and most of us did not turn out to be sexual monsters. Further, there is no evidence that cultures in which explicit sexual imagery is prevalent (such as Denmark or the Netherlands) produce more sexual pathology than those in which such material is forbidden; in fact, there are indications that quite the opposite is the case. In the explosive realm of adult-youth sex, many teens say that such relationships can be consensual and positive. And more than a few of us remember having such positive sexual relationships with adults when we ourselves were teens.

"Teens often seek out sex with older people, and they do so for understandable reasons: an older person makes them feel sexy and grown up, protected and special," writes Levine. "Often the sex is better than it would be with a peer who has as little skill as they do. For some teens, a romance with an older person can feel more like salvation than victimization." Romantic heartbreak — and plain old bad sex – are just as likely with same-age peers as with older partners. Within the gay community, especially, one often hears fond reminiscences of youthful sexual relationships with adults. For many gay men, a teenage relationship with an older man was their release from a homophobic family and peers and their introduction to a supportive community.

Nevertheless, parents are nervous — even squeamish — about their children's and teens' sexuality, often seeking to deny their offspring the sexual freedoms they themselves demanded at the same age. (Physician Victor Strasburger has even penned a paean to hypocrisy entitled "Getting Your Kids to Say 'No' in the '90s When You Said 'Yes' in the '60s." In the past two decades youthful sexual desire has become widely pathologized. As Levine notes, "It's as if (parents) cannot imagine that their kids seek sex for the same reasons they do: They like or love the person they are having it with. It gives them a sense of beauty, worthiness, happiness, or power. And it feels good."

The panic surrounding youthful sexuality can perhaps best be compared to the war on drugs: Both are based on ideology rather than science, and no amount of evidence can change the minds of true believers. Both mask underlying social agendas in which concern for children is used to control the behavior of adults. And both engender problems of credibility as young people reject exhortations to "do as I say, not as I did." Many adults recognize that they made mistakes in their youth and understandably wish to spare children similar missteps, especially in the age of AIDS. Yet too often, Levine contends, censorship and abstinence-only sex education are really an effort to hold back children's coming of age, offering parents an illusory "freedom from watching their kids grow up."

But denying young people knowledge about sex will not help them become responsible sexual citizens. As Levine notes, children today know about IPOs and the hole in the ozone layer, just as they know about abortion and sadomasochism. Parents cannot block out all uncomfortable knowledge. In order "to give children a fighting chance in navigating the sexual world," Levine says, "adults need to saturate it with accurate, realistic information and abundant, varied images and narratives of love and sex."

If a person truly has the good of young people in mind, one would hope he or she would be interested in what research has to

express his/her feelings, explore her/his potentials, s/he will never be able to unfold freely in a rich and joyous life … or in a life of revolution dreaming, creating, destroying, healing, contesting, renewing… the social repression and its learned self-repression is going to negatively affect his/her concept of self and her/his ability to relate positively to self, others and environment with a sense of freedom and responsibility through love, work and critical reflection. The reactions to those traumatic or fearful events in one's earlier life has armored one's psychological make-up against the natural, the instinctual. Our self-concept is, and has been, continually bombarded with negative experiences and subliminal messages which leave us with the feelings of insignificance, self-hatred, helplessness, powerlessness, and lifelessness. The way we learn to cope with it is by the mascarade.

We'll be able to understand, in greater depth, the problems that block revolution in this country when we are more willing and daring to learn about the psychological dimension, or that dynamic aspect of the mask. It is what one perceptive activist referred to as "self-inflicting psychological oppression." It arose from a discussion of the ways in which people in general, and activists, in spite of their high self-opinions, perpetuate the very society oppressing them by holding on to the ideas, opinions, beliefs, addictions, attitudes, gestures, relationships and established traditions that make this national life powerful and workable for the rich and already powerful. To understand this, to make an honest attempt to understand this, you must step out of the obsession with the masses, or with proving studiousness and loyalty to a particular ideology or belief. For this, you must start by examining your own damn self!

Harmful to Minors

Liz Highleyman

Few issues cause as much consternation as the sexual lives of young people, a fact made abundantly clear to author Judith Levine and the University of Minnesota Press upon publication of Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex. In the furor over the book, most commentators have missed Levine's main point: "Sex is not ipso facto harmful to minors." In fact, "America's drive to protect kids from sex is protecting them from nothing. Instead, often it is harming them."

Despite what critics contend, Harmful to Minors is not about pedophilia. It tackles a wide range of issues including censorship, statutory rape laws, abstinence-only sex education, abortion, gender, AIDS, and child welfare. The latter issue, which raises questions beyond sexuality about how our society provides for its neediest children, is "the most important one in the book," Levine told AlterNet, and "the real reason the Right is against me." But the inflammatory issue of child-adult sex continues to draw the headlines.

Why does the proposition that youth deserves sexual autonomy, pleasure, and privacy seem so radical? In the 1970s, the sexual revolution was in full swing and the idea that children and teens were sexual beings was accepted, at least among progressives. Books such as Heidi Handman and Peter Brennan's "Sex Handbook: Information and Help for Minors" and Sol Gordon's "You!" showed respect for young people and their ability to make their own sexual decisions.

For the past two decades, though, the religious right has been winning the war against comprehensive sex education, access to abortion and contraception, and the sexual autonomy of young people. By the late 1980s, Gordon had shifted his advice toward parents with "Raising a Child Conservatively in a Sexually Permissive World," and child pornography laws made it illegal to even possess a copy of "Show Me!," an award-winning sex education book for children.

What happened? Levine does not place all the blame on the Right, acknowledging the role cultural feminists played in imposing a regime of overwhelming sexual protectionism. "The Right won, but the mainstream let it," she says. "Comprehensive sex educators had the upper hand in the 1970s, and starting in the 1980s, they allowed their enemies to seize more and more territory, until the Right controlled the law, the language, and the cultural consensus." Add to this the fact that the sexual liberationists of yesterday are parents today, facing all the typical parental fears. As the joke goes, a conservative is a liberal with a teenage daughter. Many people feel a pervasive sense of dread about children and sex, but as Levine notes, things are not appreciably worse now than they were in the past. Children's exposure to sexual images is hardly new, and research indicates that rates of teen sexual activity are not "galloping upward."

As Levine documents throughout the book with copious studies and reviews of news sources, fears of rampant pedophilia, child abduction, ritual abuse, and Internet sexual predators are at best exaggerated, at worst completely unsupported by evidence. For example, studies commissioned by Congress show that between 50 and 150 children are kidnapped and murdered by strangers each year, yet in a Mayo Clinic survey three-quarters of parents said they are afraid their children will be abducted. And a 1994 U.S. government report analyzing over 12,000 accusations of Satanic ritual abuse found "not a single case where there was clear corroborating evidence."