Today's "Sexmission"

Bioethics and the Quest for Greater Understanding of Sexual and Gender Diversity

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Received: 13 June 2012 / Accepted: 21 June 2012 / Published online: 14 July 2012
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The Polish film *Seksmisja* (*Sexmission*) opens with a quote from playwright and author Sławomir Mrożek: "Jutro to dziś—tyle, że jutro," which is translated in the film's subtitles as "Tomorrow is today—but a day away."¹ A popular phrase that has been used repeatedly in many venues, from personal blogs to bank advertisements, Mrożek's quote sets the stage for this 1984 science fiction comedy by Juliusz Machulski, Jolanta Hartwig, and Pavel Hajný that explores gender in the year 2044 when males no longer exist (thanks to

nuclear war and an "M-bomb" developed by a male scientist that "was supposed to paralyze male genes temporarily ... [but] instead of paralyzing, eliminated the male genes. Once and forever").² The only surviving men in this post-apocalyptic (and post-feminist?) world are protagonists Maksymilian and Albercik, who were cryogenically preserved in 1991. Thanks to the war, however, this three-year experiment (ironically conducted by the very scientist who would develop the M-bomb) goes awry, and Albert and Maks are not reanimated until 53 years later. They awake to find themselves in a world of women, and what is often cast stereotypically as the ultimate "male fantasy" is nothing short of a nightmare for the two "heroes"—who clearly prefer the sexist and heteronormative status quo of their own time and who fail throughout this experience to transform their behaviors, thinking, or ideals.

A cult classic, the film's depiction of "the sexes" is both troublesome and a springboard for further exam-

¹ There is variation in the translation. Other translations, including some versions of the subtitles for the film, interpret the Mrożek quote as "Tomorrow is today, only tomorrow," "Tomorrow is today—but tomorrow," or "Tomorrow is already today, but it's happening tomorrow." The translation used here was taken from a viewing of *Seksmisja* on June 14, 2012, at Det Danske Filminstitut (the Danish Film Institute).

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² As is often the case, art holds a "mirror up to nature," as Hamlet opines (III.ii.22), and frequently comes to reflect, shape, and even predict reality. The filmmakers' premise regarding the harms technology poses with regard to reproduction is not as far-fetched as one might initially think. Research on "endocrine disruptors" (aka environmental estrogens) by scientists around the globe such as Niels Skakkebaek, Shanna Swan, Louis Guillette, Tyrone Hayes, Ana Soto, and Richard Sharpe, to name a few, has demonstrated far-reaching reproductive and other health consequences in both animals and humans (see, for example, de Lestrade and Gilman 2007 and Carlsen et al. 1992).

ination: The world dominated by women is something of a Platonic cave, not only bleak and bland but also mechanically and epistemologically flawed. Food-stuffs (apparently due to the nuclear war) are artificial and tasteless; decadence is forbidden and punishable; machinery is defective and unreliable; and history has been rewritten so that “[a]ll great scholars, fathers of progress, great humanists” such as Copernicus and Einstein have been transformed into women, and man is deemed woman’s ultimate enemy (and the sole inventor of “prostitution, slavery, cowardice, laziness” and “all evil in the world,” from “religious wars to cervical cancer”). Of course, this narrative offers some truth and, at least in part, touches on important feminist discourse, such as when the prior world is described as a place where woman was but a “waitress” at a “feast” ruled by males. The women are also depicted as capable athletes and warriors (although it could be argued here that these remain masculine ideals).

On the other hand, Maks is constantly troubled about how a “woman orders [him] about” and how he is repeatedly “beaten up by a woman”; Albert demands to talk with a male leader in charge; and both of the men *as well as* several of the females in the film describe the process of “naturalization” (i.e., transforming the men into women) as a fate for the men that is “worse than death.” (In this way the film also broaches, however briefly, a conversation about sexuality and gender identity. For example, much earlier in the film, the two men are “tagged” on their ears with silver, hoop-shaped tracking devices, to which Maks crudely retorts, “Come on! Don’t turn us into faggots.”) Several opportunities also are taken in the film to exploit the nearly all-female cast and engage in that male fantasy of “the lone man in a world of women”: The professional athletes ceremoniously exchange shirts in a show of sportsmanship at the end of a game; members of a “decadence herd” are shown kissing passionately, much to Maks’ glee; and women undress at work and in elevators and swim naked in an indoor pool that has viewing portholes akin to a washing machine or an aquarium. Moreover, the two women who end up as mates for the men are “converted” through forceful kissing (and, ultimately, sex), with an intimation that any initial protestations on the women’s part stem not from “real” refusal but merely (heteronormative) inexperience.

In the end, the film holds up the (heterosexual) penis as woman’s ultimate “entertainment” (as if it were incapable of being the source of anything less enjoyable) and conveys the message that it is not worth being a woman “if there are no men.” The “heroes” escape the apocalyptic cave that turns out to be but a ruse, seemingly with no intentions of revealing the “light of day” to the all-female society relegated underground, and triumph by literally spreading their seed—both with their new “Eves” and by contaminating the parthenogenesis labs (where girls are born) with their own sperm.³

This long (and, we apologize, “film-spoiling”) introduction serves to frame an incipient discussion of the “tomorrows” with respect to “Bioethics, Sexuality, and Gender Identity” that have come from the “todays” of the 20th century. On the one hand, much progress has been made in revising (though not yet overturning?) longstanding personal and institutionalized ignorance, hate, prejudice, and stigma with regard to male-dominated and heteronormative sexuality and gender identity; on the other, even within this past year

³ While the male characters learn nothing from this experience, the film is perhaps about the female protagonist’s transformation(s). Lamia, a social scientist and the principal investigator studying Albert and Maks, is a dutiful state employee who—through deception—recaptures her research subjects when they try to escape their involuntary confinement (and the “clutches” of women attempting to either “naturalize” or terminate them). When Lamia realizes that she, too, has been deceived by the very people to whom she is loyal, she changes from the men’s enemy to ally and risks her own death by escaping with them into the unknown and supposedly radioactive world above ground. Lamia’s metamorphosis also may be said to be one of “sexual awakening.” Part of her motivation to help the men is the strange feeling that has emerged after Maks has touched her and kissed her (against her will). In an attempt to investigate these new sensations, she seeks out the oldest of the “oldies,” a woman also confined (in a type of “old-age home”) but who remembers what it was like to live with men—telling Lamia in so many words that penises provide a type of “entertainment” like nothing else and that life without men is not worth living. Presumably Lamia comes to agree, as she giddily confides details of her sexual experience with Maks with another woman who also has experienced this heteronormative sex for the first time with Albert. The fact that the narrative is not told primarily through the character of Lamia, but through her male counterparts, and that such “sexual liberation” only comes from a heteronormative form of sex reduces any transformation Lamia undergoes. It is difficult to say which is worse: the men’s complete lack of transformation with regard to sexuality and gender or Lamia’s “awakening” that takes the shape of a heteronormative situation that has dominated the past.

alone, it seems that a more positive tomorrow remains much further than “a day away.”

In most Western societies, the previous two centuries witnessed the public discussion of human sexuality arise and then “come out” from its earlier “closet” (see Foucault 1990), beginning an ongoing conversation that has continued to reveal the cruelty and hypocrisy of many cultures and religious perspectives with regard to sexual and reproductive matters that have caused untold suffering and great injustice (primarily for the those directly persecuted but also for social moral progress as well). This is still the case where religious fundamentalism prevails (which, as discussed below, is not just a condition of the “Other” but persists in our own backyards, too). Happily, enlightened liberal democracy has seen greater personal freedom emerge in many parts of the world and, with it, more open discussion of sexuality and gender as well as legal reform of key issues related to contraception, abortion, homosexuality, and transgenderism.

These changes in Western social behavior and the public expression of sexuality that has emerged have been dramatic. In the words of English poet Philip Larkin (from his “Annus Mirabilis”):

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me)—
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban
And the Beatles’ first LP (1974, 55).

Larkin’s references to these “years of wonder” and iconic moments of popular culture and individualism that mark a “sexual liberation” in the collective Western consciousness (Chatterjee 2006, 315) herald both the benefits and difficulties this openness has generated. More openness has meant that there is support for single and “alternative” parenting, that marginalized groups and practices are legitimized, and that the cruelty of social exclusion is lessened by greater equality in relation to both gender and sexual identity. Although these are works in progress nearly everywhere, there is now more candid political and ethical discussion of these issues as well as clinical practice in sexual health, contraception, abortion, and gender reassignment. These formerly taboo subjects are increasingly integrated into health and legal systems in many countries where previously they were stigmatized or ignored altogether.

The obvious example is the removal in 1973 of homosexuality as a category of disease in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, and today similar debates are taking place with regard to “gender identity disorder.” Many countries, moreover, have legalized same-sex civil unions or same-sex marriage, primarily in Europe but also parts of Latin America and a handful of states in the United States. And thanks to both social changes and advances in biotechnology, variations of parents and parenting have been recognized. There are even hints that transgenderism is becoming more accepted. For instance, every Danish citizen receives a national personal identification number (known as the CPR number), the last digit of which is either even (for female) or odd (for male). While an antiquated view of gender based on a dualistic understanding of biological sex is built into this CPR system, if and when a person undergoes sex-reassignment surgery, he or she can change this last digit to better reflect his or her identity. This is one of the few instances when a CPR number can be altered. (This does, of course, mean that individuals who are intersex, not self-identified as “male” or “female,” or transgender but do not wish to undergo sex reassignment surgery are stuck with being “even” or “odd.”)

But more work needs to be done, and, if we were to become too complacent with what progress has thus far been made, one need only revisit the disturbing “backslides” from the previous few months. In St. Petersburg, Russia, for example, a law took effect in March that “outlaws displays of homosexuality that could influence children ... [and] calls for fines for people who promote ‘public actions aimed at propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality, and transgenderism among minors’” (Krystian 2012, ¶1). In North Carolina, an amendment to that state’s constitution stipulating that “[m]arriage between one man and one woman is the only domestic legal union that shall be valid or recognized” was passed in May (Stam 2012, ¶2). The “amendment effectively seals the door on same-sex marriages” and “also goes beyond state law by voiding other types of domestic unions from carrying legal status, which opponents warn could disrupt protection orders for unmarried couples” (Waggoner 2012, ¶7–¶8).

And only a few months earlier, in February, a debate that seemingly was settled nearly half a century ago with *Griswold v. Connecticut* (381 U.S. 479

[1965]) and *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (405 U.S. 438 [1972]) reignited in the United States regarding access to birth control in relation to a provision in the *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA)* that requires contraception, like other preventive services, to be covered by insurers. Religious and conservative groups have vehemently objected—even though there exists not only a religious exemption in the law (Sonfield 2012; see Department of the Treasury, Department of Labor, and Department of Health and Human Services 2011) but also a 2003 ruling by the California Supreme Court in a similar case (*Catholic Charities v. Superior Court*, 85 P.3d 67 [2004]). While the decision of the California court is not binding at a national level, it nonetheless provides reasoned judicial precedent on the matter, although no politicians or media pundits have seen fit to examine this legal history. Thus, the “debate” seems more about political maneuvering and social control than religious liberty, to the deficit of women and the partners in their lives (as the main “male” form of contraception, the condom, is not medically and legally controlled). Two telling moments illustrate this point: the absence of women and women’s voices at a U.S. House of Representatives committee hearing on the *ACA* and birth-control issue (McGregor 2012; Pear 2012) and radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh calling law student Sandra Fluke, who testified at a later panel in favor of contraceptive coverage, a “slut” and a “prostitute” (and, in good conservative form, a drain on “taxpayers” to boot) (Fard 2012).

Even a group of Catholic nuns in the United States has been reprimanded by the Vatican for “[c]orporate dissent’ in the congregation regarding the church’s sexual teachings” and a “prevalence of certain radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith” (McElwee 2012, ¶18) or, in the words of one *New York Times* article, “for focusing its work too much on poverty and economic injustice, while keeping ‘silent’ on abortion and same-sex marriage” (Goodstein 2012, ¶6).

This feels more like a “yesterday” than a “tomorrow.”

Such examples make one wonder whether cultural notions of sexuality, particularly those that veer from a male-dominated heteronormativity, will be venerated or vilified.

Perhaps the challenge in recognizing the continuum of gender and sexual differences is that this taps

deeply into cultural, religious, and social norms. Openness about sexuality—although meant to throw off the shackles that keep us in the cave—can reveal serious and intractable divisions within and between cultures, faiths, and generations. It is arguable, for example, that large differences in sexual mores are a source of the controversial “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1996) that have so divided the world over the last two decades. Militant Islamic groups often point to the contempt they feel for what they see as Western sexual decadence (perhaps much like *Seks-misja*’s troublesome “decadence herds”), and the West sees the treatment of women in some of the more fundamentalist societies (while at times turning a blind eye on their own, as noted above) as unacceptable.

One also could argue that sexual liberation has reduced social cohesion and inter-generational solidarity and has had a role in the decline of influence of formal mainstream religious institutions, although religious denominations have much to answer for in the ongoing discrimination against non-heterosexuals and women and the sexual abuse scandals that have rocked most notably the Roman Catholic Church across the world.

Moreover, commodification of sex in the media and premature sexualization of young people (mainly girls) are growing concerns, linked to alarming reports of body dysmorphic disorders among adolescents and young adults (and, with the rise of plastic surgeries in the culture of youth, even those older). Everyone is increasingly exposed to images and fashions that demean and threaten well-being, and pornography is widely available, with widespread possibilities for exploitation.

How can we avoid waking up in 2044, like Maks and Albert, in a desolate world that still fails to understand sexuality and gender identity and, thus, merely reproduces the mistakes of the past?

In its own way, bioethics—and, in particular, a Queer Bioethics as put forward by Lance Wählert and Autumn Fiester in this special issue of the *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*—is a means for fostering the healthy and productive side of sexual liberation, through debate and research on human sexuality and gender in their both personal and societal moral and legal dimensions. Bioethics tries to consider without prejudice—and via scholarly standards and traditions—issues that are easily hijacked by media, advertising, and corporate greed, on the one

hand, and religious dogma, on the other. As sexuality and gender identity are so related to our being-in-the-world, it is not surprising that objectivity and fairness are some of the first casualties of any debate and that differences can seem hard-wired (culturally and politically, more so than biologically). A right and proper way to deal with profound difference is to lay out facts in an honest way and then analyze the superimposed assumptions, values, and norms. What better role is there for global bioethics than to promote this sort of contemplative analysis that applies principles of beneficence, justice, and equity with respect to human beings and human rights as the starting point of any guideline, policy, or law in one of our most contested domains?

But not only are bioethicists often missing in our post-apocalyptic narratives (where were they when Professor Kuppelweiser was developing the M-bomb or the women were debating whether to “naturalize” Maks and Albert or kill them for their organs?), they also seem muffled in current public debates involving sexuality and gender, among other bioethical issues, that have led to policies and law more at home in previous eras.

If room at the table is routinely made for bioethicists engaged in that honest analysis, perhaps we can create a tomorrow that lifts us all out of the cave and into a brighter world not marked by narrow-minded divisions and (sexual and religious) war but knowledge and true liberation.

But we must continue to work now, because tomorrow is already today.

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