

1. Playboy, icon, leader: Hugh Hefner and postwar American sexual culture

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In 1965, a Midwestern pastor's wife identified only as "S.J.M." wrote to *Playboy* magazine founder, Hugh Hefner, to praise his magazine (Letter from S.J.M., 1965).^{*} She spoke of her and her husband's belief in sexual education and experimentation. The woman told Hefner that *Playboy* was serving an important function in expanding the American sexual imagination. She implored Hefner,

I ... sincerely urge you to continue to press forward in your intelligent campaign to break down the ignorance and stupidity of the official attitude toward sex. It will require ... tremendous courage on your part. But ... it can be done. By 1975, an entire generation will have matured under your influence.

To modern eyes, it may seem strange that anyone would have such high expectations for a magazine like *Playboy*. But in the 1960s, Hefner had carved out for his publication a significant place within American sexual culture. After its founding in December, 1953, *Playboy* quickly became more than a monthly girlie magazine. Of course, its centerfold Playmates established for the nation—and much of the world—narrow, often unattainable standards of youthful beauty. But in its pages could also be found the brightest lights of the literary scene, cutting-edge political reporting, and leading fashion and design commentary. Moreover, Hefner's creation rapidly expanded into an international cultural empire, including iconic nightclubs, resorts, publishing, television shows, and myriad bunny logo-embossed paraphernalia. Not merely a publisher, not merely a celebrity playboy, Hugh Hefner was a leader in the formation of a new sexual culture in the post-World War II years.

Hefner modernized midcentury sexual culture in several ways. He articulated flexible, more closely aligned versions of masculinity and femininity; argued for greater tolerance of and protections for homosexuals; and was vociferous in his support for women's rights, especially

abortion. All of these positions put him at the forefront of a changing heterosexual culture.

At the center of his empire, Hefner fashioned a lifestyle magazine that was about more than sex. *Playboy* promoted upward economic mobility for men through regular features on dress, gourmet food, jazz, home design, travel, and more. It made a name for itself with important interviews with both domestic and foreign political leaders and cultural creators, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Fidel Castro, and Joan Baez. *Playboy* wore the mantle of liberal politics, espousing support for the Civil Rights Movement, standing against the Vietnam War, and embracing liberalization of drug laws, among other things.

By the mid-1960s, Hefner's empire had become an institution. For instance, in 1962, a final exam in a Harvard business course focused on the entrepreneurial practices of Hefner, while the *Playboy* Philosophy—a rambling editorial series focused on Hefner's world views—found its way into Sunday morning sermons (Davidson, 1962). One church's weekly service program asked, "What is the contemporary moral incarnation of The *Playboy* Philosophy—and of the Christian gospel?" ("Chimes," 1965). The mainstream media acknowledged the breadth of Hefner's influence. William F. Buckley, Jr., noted that *Playboy* and its hedonistic credo was a "movement" that included "professors and ministers and sociologists." Writing for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1972, Digby Diehl called *Playboy* a "major instrument of social and moral change in the mid-20th century" (p. W20).

Scholars have overlooked much of this postwar legacy. Traditionally, academics have portrayed Hefner as sexist, conservative, or even reactionary. Reflecting conventional feminist critiques, Hefner is seen as the embodiment of patriarchy, an antifeminist crusader whose magazine objectified women and upheld the culture that was challenged by the progressives of the 1960s. Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) helped establish this narrative. Ehrenreich situated *Playboy* within a perceived postwar crisis of masculinity. She argued that *Playboy* helped to liberate masculinity for a new, hedonistic lifestyle. Ehrenreich pointed to *Playboy*'s open hostility toward the traditional pressures that obliged men to marry and become fathers, arguing that *Playboy* "hated wives." According to her, the magazine "presented ... a coherent program for the male rebellion" against domestic obligation (pp. 42, 50). This view was reinforced by historian Beth Bailey (1988) when she wrote that Hefner was the "guru of [gender] separateness" and that his magazine promoted male dominance. Joanne Meyerowitz (1996) suggested a more nuanced view of the magazine. Meyerowitz analyzed women's letters to the editor

in publications such as *Playboy* and argued that the letters pointed to a complex view of gender and sexuality held by postwar women.

The magazine was viewed as a cultural arbiter that freed men from the constraints of traditional manhood by acting as a “celebration of a masculine universe of consumption and narcissistic display ... while hedonistic fun and sensual indulgence were defining virtues” (Osgerby, 2001, p. 122). Osgerby’s work repeated the assertion that the *Playboy* world was one of sexism and masculine self-interest.

In considering the scope of *Playboy*’s influence, scholars have explored popular editorial columns to examine the ways the magazine both challenged and reinforced traditional gender expectations. For instance, the regular culinary features co-opted food preparation from women and transformed it into a sexy bachelor activity for a new middle-class culture of leisure and consumption (Hollows, 2002). Similarly, Beatriz Preciado (2004) explored *Playboy*’s conceptualization of the bachelor pad. She wrote that in “recolonizing” the traditional, private sphere of women, *Playboy*’s design articles created an “antidomestic” interior space for men that was ultimately an attack on the privatization of the suburbs, and, by extension, American women.

Historian James Gilbert (2005) examined the dominant paradigm that saw the postwar period as a time of identity crisis for American men. He argued that the “manhood” of the era cannot be easily categorized as either traditional and declining, or rebellious and threatening. He demonstrated that there were various models of manhood with which one could identify, including that of *Playboy*’s own editorial director, A. C. Spector-sky. He argued that Spector-sky used *Playboy* to exploit anxious manhood and to rail against what he saw as the growing feminization of American culture.

Of course, the centerfold Playmates have warranted much attention. Exploring the ways in which feminists have created, consumed, and exploited pin-up imagery, Maria Elena Buszek (2006) focused on what she saw as “casual misogyny” in the magazine. Within the existing academic literature on *Playboy*, views like Buszek’s are common, and often echo the antipornography writings of activists like Catharine MacKinnon (1988), Andrea Dworkin (1981), and others.

In spite of this overwhelming criticism, there is a growing body of literature that refutes these views of *Playboy*. Sociologists have done revisionist work on *Playboy*’s relationship to gender and sexuality and have come to drastically different conclusions than its critics. Joseph E. Scott and Steven J. Cuvelier (1987) published an essay that challenged the claims of antiporn writers such as MacKinnon, who have accused publications like *Playboy* of promoting violence against women. Scott

and Cuvelier conducted a study regarding images of violence in *Playboy* and found them almost totally lacking. Anthony F. Bogaert, D. A. Turkovich, and C. L. Hafer (1993) examined *Playmate* centerfolds from 1953 through 1990 for evidence of sexual objectification, and again found such occurrences to be very low.

Sociologists James K. Beggan, Patricia Gagné, and Scott T. Allison (2000) published a statistical analysis of *Playboy's* advice column, the "Advisor." They found that the Advisor consistently promoted compassion, tolerance, and equality among men and women, and challenged stereotypes and the double standard. Beggan and Allison (2001, 2005) then examined the text accompanying *Playmate* centerfolds, which often included descriptions of the types of men the models desired. Beggan and Allison argued that in these descriptions the *Playmates*, and by extension *Playboy*, celebrated masculinity that included traditionally feminine characteristics, thus expanding definitions of manhood. They demonstrated that *Playboy's* editorial approach promoted the cultivation of a gentlemanly demeanor that held women's opinion and acceptance in high esteem.

Increasingly, other scholars have acknowledged a more complex view of Hefner and his magazine. Looking at the magazine's treatment of consumerism, work and leisure, and money, Elizabeth Fraterrigo (2009) argues that *Playboy* was central to creating a new vision of the "good life" for American men in the postwar years, and suggests that the magazine took a progressive stance on questions of gender and sexuality. The definitive biography of Hefner, written by Steven Watts (2008), argued that the publisher and icon was not only one of the most significant cultural figures of the twentieth century, but also "a serious shaper of ... modern American values ... [his magazine] a historical force of significant proportions" (p. 3).

Although scholarly consideration of Hugh Hefner has grown more sophisticated, even *Playboy's* defenders have not acknowledged the extent to which Hefner claimed an audacious mantle of progressive sexual leadership in the prerevolutionary years of the 1950s and early 1960s. It is well established that *Playboy* helped to create a new brand of postwar masculinity centered on hedonistic consumerism. The iconic centerfold nudes of the magazine have received much attention, but have left most observers with the assumption that *Playboy* promoted unfettered male heterosexual privilege. What most scholars have overlooked are the various ways in which Hefner blazed a trail for sexual and gender respect, tolerance, and progressive politics.

Though *Playboy's* sprawling postwar cultural authority was understood by contemporaries, as in the Sunday sermons and the Harvard course, it

may be surprising in the early twenty-first century. There are ways in which even *Playboy's* assumed forte—representation and discussion of sex itself—was more influential, and more progressive, than many modern commentators acknowledge. Hefner's magazine pushed at the boundaries of acceptable sexual expression amid the socially conservative 1950s, anticipating and helping along the sexual revolution of the coming decade.

At no point could anyone have challenged *Playboy's* status as “entertainment for men,” although its target audience was more narrowly defined as *heterosexual* men. Indeed, Hefner (1963, p. 128) admitted “a strong personal prejudice in favor of the boy-girl variety of sex.” He vociferously challenged the postwar status quo by trumpeting casual, straight sex, but he was not just interested in teasing men with titillating photos of women. Hefner was on a crusade against the dark, repressive forces he found responsible for American sexual inhibition, particularly organized religion. That battle actually predated *Playboy*. As a college student and campus journalist, Hefner wrote about the tradition of American sexual repression as he saw it; and in the first issue of *Playboy*, he referenced the important influence of Alfred Kinsey. The culmination of this drive was a highly politicized, progressive magazine that addressed a variety of social and political questions about sexual equality and justice. A team of liberal, even radical, editors contributed to this slant. But nothing appeared in the magazine's pages without Hefner's sanction. From the Playmates, to the fashion, to the politics, *Playboy* was a vision of the world according to Hefner.

Despite his focus on straight masculinity, Hefner staked a claim for sexual openness when he quietly opened a conversation about tolerance in the mid-1950s. At that time, gay men and lesbians were targeted with social, professional, and political persecution. Homosexuality was considered a mental illness (American Psychiatric Association, 1952), discrimination in hiring and housing was legal, and law enforcement professionals often raided gay hangouts. But in 1955, less than two years after bursting onto the publishing scene, Hefner resisted the tide of straight society and offered a public defense of homosexuality. In August, *Playboy* ran a science fiction story by Charles Beaumont called “The Crooked Man.” It told the futuristic tale of a world in which heterosexuality was considered abnormal and deviant, and homosexuality was the standard. Heterosexuals were persecuted and subject to surgery to correct their “problem.” Apparently *Esquire* originally bought the piece but decided against running it. *Playboy* then “snatched it up,” Hefner told Ray Bradbury (Hefner letter, 1955), because “a good story is a good story.”

One reader responded to the piece by saying, “Such an absurd hypothetical topsy-turvydom must surely leave one ... to quite incredulous chuckle ... to see such a gifted writer twisted into full-scale warfare with a paper-tiger enemy.” The editors replied to this letter: “We saw it as a kind of plea for tolerance—shoe-on-the-other-foot sort of thing. At any rate, it’s a story that prompts thought and discussion, and that’s why it is important” (Letters to the Editor, 1955). Mainstream American society would slowly begin to re-evaluate its entrenched homophobia by the 1970s. But in the 1950s, that painful process would have seemed a long way off. The country was suffering the political and psychological traumas of McCarthyism, when homosexuals were considered easy prey for communists and purged from government jobs (Cuordileone, 2005). Urban gay and lesbian communities emerged after World War II, but the dominant culture viewed homosexuality with suspicion and often outright hostility. Yet in 1955, a whisper of sympathy found its way into the pages of *Playboy* magazine. Dignity for gay men and lesbians was crucial to Hefner’s vision of sexual liberation, because in his view, a society that liberalized enough to accept homosexuals would surely grant full freedom to straight men and women.

Playboy’s treatment of homosexuality grew more prominent, along with its political voice, in the 1960s. The magazine became an important and compassionate forum for the discussion of gay and lesbian issues years before the Stonewall riots of 1969. The official position on the issue supported free expression and legal protection; by the start of the gay liberation movement at the end of the decade, *Playboy* was claiming it “consistently defended the civil rights and civil liberties of homosexuals” (Editorial response, 1969). Indeed, editors reported on legal and political developments relevant to gays and lesbians in the “Forum,” a popular readers’ letter column devoted to contemporary social and political issues which grew out of the response to Hefner’s sprawling editorial series known as “The *Playboy* Philosophy,” which ran from December 1962 to May 1965.

By the mid-1960s, discussions of homosexuality had increased in *Playboy*, paralleling an expanding cultural discussion. For example, in response to a question (1964) posed to *Playboy*’s advice column, known as the “Advisor,” M.M. from California was reassured that he need not fret over his girlfriend’s lesbian sexual experimentation in college. Later that year, the Advisor gave support (“Response to R.W.”) to a woman who worried about her family’s objection to her friendship with a gay man. In April 1964, Hefner expressed support for homosexuality in “The *Playboy* Philosophy”: “our belief in a free, rational and humane society demands a tolerance of those whose sexual inclinations are different from

our own—so long as their activity is limited to consenting adults in private and does not involve either minors or ... coercion” (p. 128). Hefner argued that pervasive homophobia existed in the United States because “The American male’s concern over his masculinity amounts to an obsession” (p. 128). Even as a postwar arbiter of straight masculinity, Hefner was unafraid to question the status of manhood in postwar America, a stance he had embraced since the earliest days of the magazine.

Hefner’s consideration of homosexuality was complex, though. In addition to the support offered in his magazine, Hefner believed that there was the possibility that a gay man could “find his way back to a predominantly heterosexual life” if society’s repressions did not force him “into a nether world inhabited almost exclusively by homosexuals” (p. 128). Hefner challenged discrimination against, and persecution of, homosexuals, but—like many midcentury Americans—he believed that gay men could be, and possibly should be, rehabilitated into active heterosexuality. Given homosexuality’s status as a mental illness at midcentury, clinical treatment was commonly offered as a cure.

The question of whether behavioral therapy should be used to turn gay men straight ignited a controversy in the Forum. In March 1969, Franklin E. Kameny, Ph.D., founder and president of the Mattachine Society and chair of the Eastern Regional Homophile Conference, wrote to the Forum to defend homosexuality as “a preferred orientation or propensity, not different in kind from heterosexuality.” He went on to say, “Homosexuality is not intrinsically inferior to heterosexuality; it is not a second-best condition.” *Playboy* offered a lengthy response:

We share your distaste for emotionally charged words such as “sickness” to describe what is more aptly called a “deviance” (the neutral term used ... to denote a departure from behavioral norms) ... [T]he exclusive homosexual is not following a preference at all but, rather, a compulsion based on phobic reactions to heterosexual stimuli ... [H]omosexuality, when compulsive and phobic, is in itself a problem that exists *in addition* to the problems caused by society’s attitude. For this reason, homosexuals should not be discouraged from seeking therapy when they want it ... In spite of our disagreement on these issues, we share your belief that the situation of the homosexual in America today would be vastly improved were it not for an intolerant and hostile society that subjects him to enormous stresses. To do away with that kind of social intolerance has been a constant and fundamental purpose of “The *Playboy* Forum.” (Editorial response to Kameny, 1969)

In a later comment, *Playboy*’s editors insisted that they took issue only with “the exclusive homosexual,” that is, an individual who was capable

of sexual response only with members of their own sex, rather than at least occasional arousal with someone of the opposite sex. On the question of the “exclusive heterosexual,” *Playboy* acknowledged, somewhat subversively, “heterosexuals often respond positively, occasionally even erotically, to the attractiveness of members of their own sex.” In the case of a man who was worried about a homosexual experience he had had as a teenager, the Advisor responded, “Your experience is trivial and important only to the extent of your own concern about it. Psychiatrists point out that such experiences are commonplace and harmless” (Editorial response to L.G., 1970). Similarly, a confused college student wrote that he had never had sex with a girl he “really liked,” but had “come close to falling in love with a few of [his] male friends,” and had one homosexual experience. The Advisor thought that he was too young to commit himself to either heterosexuality or homosexuality: “At your age, it’s not unusual to be fond of your male friends ... you’re a young man who responds to a variety of stimuli” (Letter and response to J.P., 1971).

This view of sexuality as a continuum, with most people at some point responding to either sex, was in keeping with the conclusions that Alfred Kinsey had promoted a generation earlier in his groundbreaking studies of sexuality. *Playboy* argued that a range of sexual feelings for and experiences with both sexes—“nonexclusive” sexuality—was healthy and natural. Sexuality, Hefner told his readers, was a fluid, personal construction. Though the magazine celebrated the virtues of heterosexual desire each month, Hefner and his editors did not react to the possibility of gay “stimuli” with macho insecurity, fear, or hysteria. Rather, they told their male readers that it was alright to desire other men, at least occasionally, as long as they left themselves open to women at some point as well. *Playboy*’s approach to the issue was sympathetic, not celebratory. But many gays and lesbians found public sympathy hard to come by in the 1960s, so in spite of the magazine’s conditional support, many gay men saw an ally in Hefner.

In 1964, Charles Phillips, president of the Janus Society, a Philadelphia gay rights organization, called Hefner’s early editorials on homosexuality “the most profound and realistic appraisal of sexuality found in the American press to date ... *Playboy* and Hefner stand almost alone in advancing a sane concept of sexuality” (p. 64). An anonymous reader wrote, “As a homosexual, I have learned not to expect a great deal of tolerance from members of the heterosexual world ... I was very surprised ... to read your statements ... Your attitude is intelligent and open-minded and I only wish it was more common” (Anonymous, 1964). Another said, “As a practicing homosexual myself, I know all too well that many otherwise liberal persons will not speak out for *our* civil

liberties, out of sheer fear that somebody might think that *they* are ‘faggots’ themselves. Your courage is truly admirable” (Anonymous, 1967).

Playboy was known then, as it is now, as a paean to male heterosexuality. Nonetheless, some homosexuals found Hefner’s philosophy progressive and supportive, and therefore considered his magazine an appropriate place to discuss their roles as men and their position in society.

In particular, police harassment of gay men was a common topic in the Forum. By the late 1960s, numerous letters had been printed by men who claimed to have been arrested or physically attacked by members of vice squads. In the December 1967 issue alone, almost one third of the letters published were about homosexuality,¹ five of which discussed police and governmental harassment and entrapment of gay men. James Wittenberg of San Jose stated in 1967, “although I do not rob or kill or defraud, I am a criminal, because I am a homosexual.” Another man who witnessed a police assault in a gay bar asked: “Who or what am I harming merely by my existence?” (Anonymous, 1967). Alternately, a straight man wondered, “If the laws and mores in America are changed to accept homosexual behavior, who is going to protect me, the average American male, from homosexuals and perverts?” *Playboy* responded, “Legalization of homosexual acts in private ... and public acceptance of such behavior does not automatically mean that sexual assault ... will also be accepted ... But we believe you exaggerate the threat to the average American male” (Letter and response, 1968). Though *Playboy* was unapologetically heterosexual, some gay men and lesbians found comfort in Hefner’s campaign for sexual freedom.

Hefner’s position on homosexuality was entirely logical, given his overall vision of sexual freedom; likewise his philosophy on women’s reproductive rights. Despite the traditional feminist critique of Hefner—which decried his magazine as sexist, objectifying, and patriarchal—*Playboy* took a progressive stance on women’s rights and was particularly vocal in support of abortion. Evidence of this can be found in the magazine’s articles and editorials and the charitable donations of the Playboy Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the magazine, which contributed thousands of dollars to abortion rights organizations before *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion in 1973. In addition, the Foundation provided the American Civil Liberties Union with funds for their work on women’s rights, and helped fund daycare centers for working mothers. The Foundation was created to enact the social and political philosophy that Hefner had laid out in “The Playboy Philosophy.” Like the conversations about

homosexuality, the letters and editorial responses included in the *Forum* became an important public dialogue about abortion rights.

Like the larger women's movement, the abortion rights movement had reached a peak by the early 1970s, but had been active in a limited capacity since the early 1960s. In the mid-1960s, abortion was being discussed in the popular American press, though the movement for abortion rights was still in its infant stages. Lawrence Lader, who, with Pat Maginnis, helped to found the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) in 1969, was active in the nascent abortion rights movement in the mid-1960s. He said of national support, "There was almost nobody in the beginning, so it was lonely ... I couldn't even tell whether the incipient Women's Movement was interested in abortion" (Messer and May, 1994, p. 199).

Lader and Maginnis found an ally in *Playboy*. The magazine published its first statement in support of the legalization of abortion in its December 1965 *Forum*, as readers increasingly contributed their thoughts on the issue. Some, such as Janelle Lindsey, opposed legalization. She decried the "pain and confusion" of abortion, and demanded that men take responsibility for contraception before pregnancy: "I ... distrust any man running around trying to get abortion legalized—that's *me* he's tossing around like a political football ... For the female readers of *Playboy* who aren't taking birth-control pills ... your subscriptions should be cancelled immediately!" *Forum* editors responded:

We can't contradict your contention that the best birth-control method is a contraceptive used at the proper time ... We do feel, however, that the question of abortion is one of alternatives rather than absolutes ... [T]he legalization of abortion would simply increase the alternatives available to [a pregnant woman] ... We're not a woman ... if we were, we would welcome the additional freedom of choice that legalized abortion would provide. (Letter and response, 1965)

In spite of *Playboy's* status as a men's magazine, many women wrote in to explain why they had sought abortions. In 1966, one anonymous woman wrote:

in desperation, I decided even possible death could not be worse, so went through with [the abortion]. The experience turned out to be even worse that I had anticipated ... How different this might have been if laws had permitted me to go to a hospital where my own doctor could have attended me. (p. 66)

Another woman described her "horrid" experience in a home for unwed mothers and concluded, "Men make the laws and women suffer the

consequences. I'm for letting the girl make her own choice—without legal interference" (Anonymous, 1967).

In May 1967, *Playboy* expanded its coverage of the movement to include practical information for readers. In the *Forum*, editors listed the states considering abortion reform, as well as the names of the respective congressional representatives. *Playboy* called on readers to write to their congressmen and demand abortion reform. Readers responded with a flood of letters. Fully one half of the 24 *Forum* letters published in August 1967 were about abortion; the majority were in favor of reform (pp. 35–7). To one letter from a woman who described her guilt and shame over an abortion she had as a teenager, *Playboy* replied, "It is our hope that a general increase of openness and honesty about sex, more adequate sex education for teenagers ... and a liberalization of abortion laws will spare other girls from experiences such as yours" (p. 37). With letters submitted by activists and average women, as well as progressive legislators and abortion providers, as well as *Playboy's* own commentary, men and women alike received not only political consciousness-raising in the *Playboy Forum*, but an education as well.

With growing public debate, as evidenced in *Playboy* and throughout the culture, the abortion rights movement became truly national in scope in the late 1960s and particularly by 1970. By then various states, including Colorado and New York, had begun to expand access to abortion (DuBois & Dumenil, 2016, p. 647). By that time, the Playboy Foundation had been working for increased access to contraceptives and abortion for several years. One of the Playboy Foundation's important causes was the legal defense of abortion rights advocate Bill Baird, director of the Hempstead, New York Parents' Aid Society. With "Hef's enthusiastic approval," the Playboy Foundation gave Baird legal assistance when he was prosecuted for distributing birth control and abortion information (Lehrman to Rosenzweig, 1969).

Playboy began reporting on Baird's crusade when Baird himself wrote a long letter to the *Forum* describing the legal trouble he had run into for distributing contraceptives in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and later Wisconsin. Editors responded with an update on state contraceptive laws, and pledged their moral and financial support (Baird, 1968). Baird and others, such as representatives of Planned Parenthood; the Abortion Counseling, Information and Referral Services of New York; and various other activist organizations, used the *Forum* as a clearinghouse to publicize abortion services, provide practical information on procedures and to tell readers how to contact them (*Forum*, June 1971). The *Forum* became such a prominent proponent of legalization that at least one

organization, the California Committee to Legalize Abortion, claimed it was “formed in response to an appeal published in [the] *Forum*” (Wright, 1967).

As the debate over abortion reached a cultural peak, the issue claimed a significant number of pages in *Playboy*. In September 1970, the magazine ran a piece by Dr. Robert Hall entitled “The Abortion Revolution,” described as “a doctor’s chronicle of the bitter and continuing battle to abolish our obsolete laws against terminating pregnancy” (p. 112). Hall was an outspoken advocate for legalization; calling abortion laws “absurd,” he echoed the typical stance of the “Playboy Philosophy” when he wrote that the contemporary debate surrounding the rights of the fetus had no place in a country founded on the principle of separation of church and state (p. 112).

Reader responses to Hall’s article included a letter from Mary S. Calderone, a leading activist for sex education in the United States, who thanked *Playboy* for publishing the piece. Similar praise came from Representative Leland H. Rayson of Illinois, who sponsored state abortion reform bills, and noted psychotherapist Albert Ellis. Like the Hall article, *Forum* letters reflected the questions surrounding the larger cultural debate. A woman from Indianapolis described her experience of obtaining an abortion in 1969: “I did not kill an infant ... What the abortionist took from my body was an organism ... Far from feeling like a murderess, I believe I saved two lives—my own and that of the man who made me pregnant” (Letter, p. 86). Another woman said she was abandoned by the father of her child, and was unable to travel to get an abortion in time. She wrote: “It breaks my heart to think what must happen to women without financial resources when they get into this predicament” (Letter, 1971, p. 53).

In September 1971, *Playboy* included “A Special ‘*Playboy Forum*’ Report,” aimed at aiding women in obtaining abortions. In the report, the magazine surveyed the changing state abortion laws but ultimately concluded that recent progress had stalled: “The holy war to protect the ‘right to life’ of the fetus gets into high gear—and American women are the victims” (Backlash, 1971). The piece provided contact information for pro-choice organizations such as NARAL and offered guidance on how to obtain an abortion, which again included practical information such as phone numbers for abortion consultation services in various states and overseas; for states without such hotlines, *Playboy* listed national organizations such as Planned Parenthood (p. 77).² Further, updates on legal battles surrounding abortion and other contemporary issues were featured monthly in a portion of the *Forum* called “Newsfront.”

Organizations that appeared in the *Forum* enjoyed increased visibility, and were often able to expand their reach. For instance, Ruth Proskauer Smith (1971), president of the Abortion Rights Association of New York, noted that after her organization was mentioned in a previous issue, it received “several hundred requests from *Playboy* readers” for informational pamphlets on abortion rights. Smith’s organization was later able to revise and reprint a pamphlet on abortion providers because the “response from [*Playboy*] readers was so great” (Smith, 1972). Likewise, Roberta Schneiderman (1972) of Zero Population Growth Abortion Referral Service thanked *Playboy* for publishing phone numbers for the service, saying: “we received over 700 calls from persons who said they found us through *Playboy* ... Please keep up the good work. Elective abortion couldn’t have a better friend and we are enormously grateful.” Attorney Harriet F. Pilpel (1969), board member of Planned Parenthood-World Population and of the American Civil Liberties Union, called reproductive freedom “a necessary and fundamental freedom in a democratic society,” and praised the *Forum* “for its significant role in reporting developments and opinions in science, law, morality and sociology as they relate to sex, reproduction, civil liberties and human rights.” In 1972, Bill Baird continued his struggle for expanded access to birth control and abortion, and continued to be prosecuted in various states. He appealed to *Playboy*’s readers once again that year, and thanked the foundation for its support. After the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a woman’s right to an abortion in the 1973 case *Roe v. Wade*, *Playboy* celebrated the decision and the role it saw itself as having played in changing the social dialogue surrounding the issue (p. 71).

Playboy was known then, as it is now, as a paean to straight male privilege. But as its record of support for sexual difference and women’s reproductive rights demonstrates, Hefner used his magazine to claim a position of progressive leadership in postwar sexual culture. When he founded *Playboy* in 1953, America was awash in a conservatism that marked gay men and liberated women as deviant, even mentally ill. To suggest in 1955, as the magazine did, that heterosexuals should sympathize with same-sex orientations, or to advocate for legal abortion in 1965, meant that Hefner and his team were willing to take a risk and a stand for sexual tolerance and freedom. Likely, these positions truly were in line with Hefner’s personal progressive values. But should this new sexual system come to pass—should more marginalized Americans gain dignity, equality, and choice—it would mean that men like Hefner would advance to full sexual freedom by default. It would symbolize the defeat of the forces of oppression that Hefner had railed against his whole life.

At the height of *Playboy's* popularity in early 1970s, Hefner witnessed the changes his magazine had helped to spark in the years preceding the sexual revolution. Ironically, it was that very evolution that soon worked to challenge *Playboy's* position as an arbiter of American sexual mores. Popular culture became increasingly sexualized, and magazine competitors, such as *Penthouse* and *Hustler*, upped the ante on explicitness in ways that shocked, even disgusted, Hefner. *Playboy* influenced American sexual culture in the 1950s and 1960s, but in the coming years the magazine's vision would be surpassed by the revolution it helped to create. This irony was not lost on Hefner and his team. In 2015, he was still the head of the organization, but after pressure from lead editor Cory Jones, Hefner made the shocking decision to stop publishing the iconic nude Playmate centerfolds. As the *New York Times* reported, "Its executives admit that *Playboy* has been overtaken by the changes it pioneered. 'That battle has been fought and won,' said Scott Flanders, the company's chief executive. 'You're now one click away from every sex act imaginable for free. And so it's just passé at this juncture'" (Somaiya, 2015, p. A1). While Hefner's role as cultural leader faded over the decades, there can be no doubt that the sexual system that dominated much of the past 50 years bore the salacious stamp of the *Playboy* bunny.

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NOTES

- * Portions of this essay originally appeared in Carrie Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies: The Sexual Politics of Playboy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
1. Out of 33 letters published, 9 discussed homosexuality.
 2. The information provided was for legal services based on state law. A similar guide had been published in *New York* magazine on September 28, 1970.