

*Moral Revolutions*

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For [\*Le Conversazioni\*](#) Capri July 2015

So many customs that now shock the conscience of civilized people were once completely routine. Child marriage, honor murder, footbinding, the stoning of adulterers, and the execution of homosexuals: every one of these was endorsed by law or custom somewhere in the world well into the twentieth century. But, though not all of them are completely eradicated, something has changed in the global moral climate. In many places, the attitudes to gender and to sexuality implicit in these traditions have been swept away. There has also been a repudiation of mutilation as a form of punishment. Thomas Jefferson, that fount of Enlightenment reason, helped draught a bill for the Virginia legislature in 1778 that declared that, “Whosoever shall be guilty of Rape, Polygamy, or Sodomy with man or woman shall be punished, if a man, by castration, if a woman, by cutting thro’ the cartilage of her nose a hole of one half diameter at the least.” Not many of his twenty-first century admirers would want to defend this proposal, (though it was an advance on the practice in England, where the last public execution for homosexual acts occurred in 1835). Nor would any of them defend slavery, which he accepted, or the lynching of African-Americans, which continued in his native Virginia until the 1920s. There has been, it is fair to say, more than one revolution in moral attitudes over the last few hundred years. Looking back at any of these moral abominations, you want to ask, “What in God’s name were they thinking?”

Jefferson’s aim was to reduce the number of crimes subject to capital punishment. So, ironically, this proposal was a progressive gesture ... because he was as appalled by the excesses of his ancestors as we are by his.<sup>1</sup> And that should make us wonder what our heirs will criticize in our own routine practices. We are sure to be summoned from the grave to answer their indictments. What, in God’s name, they will ask, were you thinking when you ... ? Well, when you what? Which of our everyday routines will seem abominable a generation or two from now?

You can’t be sure that everything that now faces a sustained attack will be discredited. Sometimes history’s harsh judgment falls upon those who aimed at moral reform. In the United States, Anita Bryant—a former beauty queen from Oklahoma, who had a string of saccharine pop hits in the 1960s—headed a successful 1977 campaign to repeal local ordinances

in Florida that protected lesbians and gay men from discrimination. In 1978, when her movement succeeded in repealing ordinances in Minnesota and Oregon as well, you might have thought she was riding the wave of history. It turned out, as you know, that history was going the other way. When she began her campaign, just one state, Pennsylvania, had an anti-discrimination law to protect lesbians and gays: today, nearly half the population of the United States lives in states with anti-discrimination laws, and millions more live in cities with such protections. In 1977 hardly anyone in Anita Bryant’s country would have taken the idea of gay marriage seriously. Now more than two-thirds of Americans under the age of 30 are in favor of it. And the sentiment is shared across much of Europe and the Americas. Italy is the only European country west of the old Iron Curtain that does not recognize gay couples in its national law. Gay couples are now recognized in a majority of states in Latin America.

So how to tell which way the moral wind is blowing?

History suggests some things to look for. First, the moral arguments that succeed are not new. The arguments against slavery—or torture, or dueling, or foot-binding or anti-gay discrimination—had been around for a long time before they led to a change in practice. Jefferson and the other founders of the United States, who led a revolution under the flag of liberty, were aware that slavery was not exactly consistent with their principles.

A second sign is that the opponents increasingly depend on falsehoods. Defenders of Southern slavery in the United States claimed that slaves were, in fact, well treated by paternal plantation owners. Opponents of women’s equality asserted that women were incapable of managing their own affairs. Enemies of the decriminalization of gay sex argued that all homosexuals really wanted to have sex with children.

And finally, those who are in retreat don’t defend their claims directly. Rather they announce that they are defending tradition. Women’s rights were opposed in the name of the traditional family, gay marriage is rejected in the name of traditional marriage. Slavery was a tradition, too. When you are sure you are right, you make arguments for your position: you don’t merely declare that the ancestors were on your side.

So here are some traditions for your consideration: the treatment of animals in farming, our careless destruction of the global environment, the widespread use of criminal incarceration, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons. Try applying my three tests.

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<sup>1</sup> He abhorred for example, the *lex talionis*, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” which he called a “revolting principle. Merrill Peterson, ed. *Thomas Jefferson Writings*. New York: Literary Classics of the U.S., 1984. p. 39.