

Why Are Intactivists Up In Arms About Male Circumcision?

"No foreskin, no peace!"

by Jordan Osserman
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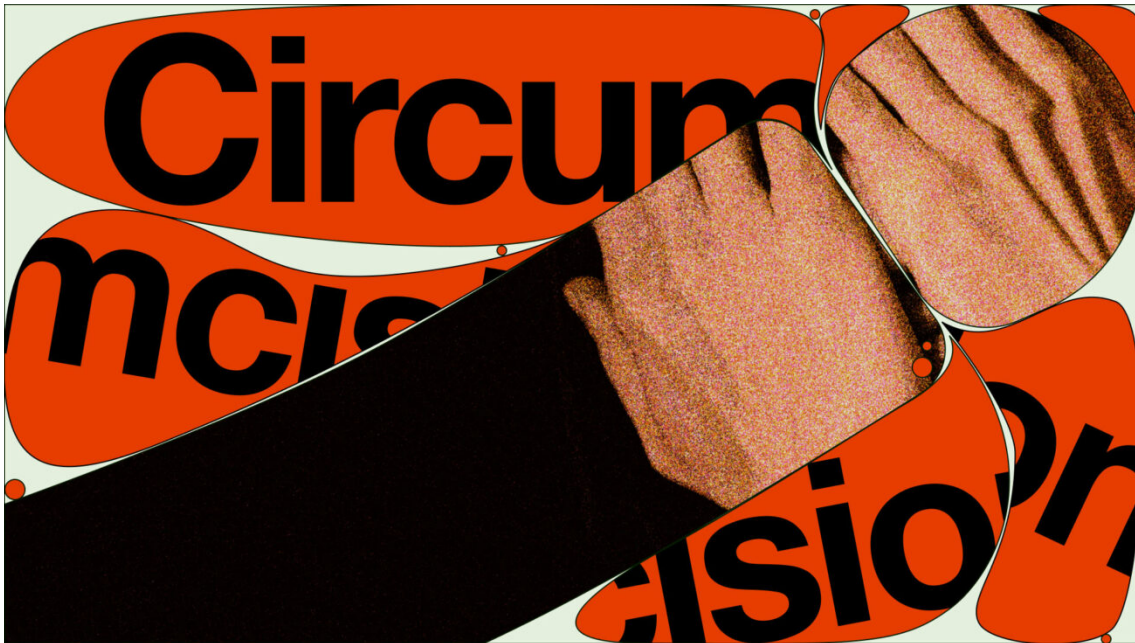


Illustration by Pietro Garrone for Novara Media. Photograph courtesy of Engin Akyurt.

In 2018 Eric Clopper, a systems administrator at Harvard, staged a one-man show at the university's Sanders Theatre. In [Sex and Circumcision: An American Love Story](#) – a two-and-a-half-hour-long mixture of monologue, PowerPoint and performance art – Clopper made a passionate, if factually questionable, case against male circumcision, accusing his Jewish faith of being a “genital mutilation cult” that has “raped essential elements of men’s humanity” and had a “demonstrably evil influence” on America.

The evening culminated in Clopper fully nude, dancing to Britney Spears’ ‘Toxic’ while fucking an inflatable sex doll. He was fired immediately after the show. At the time of writing, [his defence fund](#) has raised over \$25,000 from 416 donors.

How to account for this intensity of feeling about foreskin?

Clopper and his supporters belong to the growing “intactivist” movement opposed to the routine or religious circumcision of infants and young boys. The movement is largely comprised of white men who blame circumcision for a host of personal and political maladies, from sexual dysfunction to depression to terrorism.

In online discussions of circumcision, intactivists accuse their opponents of being “rape apologists,” and share fantasies of prelapsarian pleasure. Sex without foreskin, claims one medical doctor intactivist, is “like viewing a Renoir color-blind” (a particularly interesting claim given that most intactivists have never experienced sex with foreskin).

Meanwhile, [an entire cottage industry](#) has sprung up promising foreskin restoration using skin-tugging devices. The inventor of one such device did not stop after he achieved a “natural” foreskin length, but documents his foreskin’s continued assisted growth.

There are plenty of legitimate reasons to oppose the practice of infant male circumcision. Not all sceptics of circumcision are intactivists, and not all intactivists rely on hyperbole, misogyny and misinformation to make their case. However, as the limitlessness of this restorer’s pursuit implies, intactivists are, at their core, concerned with any apparent barriers to pleasure. This may seem like a fringe issue consigned

mostly to the political right. In fact, it's a logic to which we also fall prey on the left.

me when I see someone mention "intactivists" pic.twitter.com/itBXchW9Q7

— Jason Rosenberg (@mynameisjro) September 16, 2019

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek believes that contemporary sexual freedoms are not entirely liberatory. He argues that the sexual revolution, combined with the consumerist demands of late capitalism, generate a contemporary twist on the Freudian superego, the internal "watchman" who punished naughty – and particularly sexual – thoughts that violated Victorian respectability.

Unlike the chaste superego of which Freud wrote, the contemporary superego, argues Žižek, subjects us to unceasing imperatives to "Enjoy!" We should have sex every night to keep the oxytocin flowing; masturbate to fight menstrual cramps; and for a healthy prostate, try anal beads. No longer prudish, today's pop-cultural authorities induce us to maximise our pleasure for our own as well as society's good.

These cultural imperatives produce psychological consequences: the punishing feeling that we are never enjoying enough, or that others are always enjoying more. We wind up accepting a pro-pleasure or "sex-positive" ethos only to find ourselves faced with a relentless pressure that no amount of sex, shopping, or social media activity seems to discharge.

In our more envious moments, this can lead to scapegoating, to the thought that others have somehow *stolen* our enjoyment. "The only thing I truly want," writes an intactivist, "is the one thing that was stolen from me, which is currently impossible to get back." Intactivists present some of the more vulgar examples of how we all fall prey to this cultural ideal of maximum enjoyment: "Regain the full sexual experience," exhorts [Foregen](#), an organisation researching how to regenerate foreskins using stem cells.

What would a successful foreskin regeneration mean for you?

— Foregen (@Foregen) January 21, 2022

Part of this contemporary, super-egoic form of suffering is the inability to measure or know precisely just how far we have fallen short of our ideal. It is as if there is an unquantifiable X-factor lost from each orgasm; one fails repeatedly by an unknown degree. "How has circumcision affected you?" asks Foregen. You will never know.

A related example are incels who, like intactivists, misplace the blame for their perceived sexual failures – in their case onto women. Like intactivists, incels have internalised our cultural injunction to enjoy to an extreme degree, believing they have, as [Amia Srinivasan](#) put it, the "right to sex".

Again, questioning male circumcision – whether you identify as an intactivist or not – doesn't make you an incel. Nevertheless, it is instructive to see how the capitalist superego leads to similar kinds of scapegoating. For example, in a 1965 anti-circumcision article entitled '[The Rape of the Phallus](#)', the author contends: "Perhaps not least of the reasons why American mothers seem to endorse the operation with such enthusiasm is the fact that it is one way an intensely matriarchal society can permanently influence the physical characteristics of its males." A protestor at the 2021 storming of the US Capitol appeared alongside Q-anon believers and other alt-right conspiracy theorists, holding placards that read: "Make America's penis great again, with a foreskin! No foreskin, no peace!"

America has issues. So many issues. pic.twitter.com/cDN73eWbMa

— Hugh Riminton (@hughriminton) October 26, 2020

"If the practising psycho-analyst asks himself on account of what disorder people most often come to him for help, he is bound to reply ... that it is psychical impotence," wrote Sigmund Freud in his paper '[On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love](#)'. Freud noticed that regardless of their erectile difficulties, most men report that sex is more enjoyable with women they view as "debased", rather than those they hold in high esteem.

At root, he argues, are mummy issues – specifically an unconscious struggle over the fact that the erotic bond between mother and child remains both alluring and prohibited. Problems ensue when one's lover seems a bit like one's mother. Describing what others would later call the Madonna-whore complex, Freud concludes: "Where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love." Plymouth gunman Jake Davidson, like many incels, linked his "vile" mother to his murderous sexual

frustrations; his [Reddit posts](#) included titles like “Feel my mother has played a role in me being a male virgin”.

But whether or not you buy Freud’s theory (it obviously needs some expansion in light of LGBTQ+ sexualities), it forwards an important idea: sexual desire does not always bend to our will. Sex is not something that can be acquired or maximised, but something that constantly eludes our attempts to do so. Viagra doesn’t always work as advertised, and no amount of penis-tugging is going to make you see that Renoir in all its vivid colours.

The penis, after all, is not just an organ. It’s a bodily site invested with cultural and psychological meaning, that doesn’t always answer its owner’s wishes. Yet in today’s culture, this can be a hard pill to swallow.

Incels, intactivists and the rest of us are often frustrated that the penis does not function as an easily optimisable source of profit, that it obeys more enigmatic laws of desire. Insofar as it defies certain oppressive cultural ideals, we might even locate something anticapitalist in the vicissitudes of the phallus. With its unpredictable comings and goings, the organ serves as a visible reminder of the limitations to individual fulfilment, and our peculiar, stubborn enmeshment with the social world.

With therapy, the true causes of some sexual hangups may come to light, and their power may diminish. In his essay on impotence, however, Freud reaches a more radical conclusion: “We must reckon with the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavourable to the realisation of complete satisfaction.” Finding a way to enjoy sex may require giving up our ideas about just how much enjoyment we can extract from it.

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