



## A SLUM SEX CODE

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### ABSTRACT

Men in the slums behave in terms of an elaborate and binding sex code. Women are classified into "good girls" (virgins) and three categories of nonvirgins. For each category there is an appropriate form of behavior supported by social sanctions. Social and familial ties within the community also determine sex behavior. The limitations the code places upon social activity within the slum tend to push young men and women toward outside contacts and thus promote assimilation and social mobility.

Respectable middle-class people have very definite standards of sex behavior. They are inclined to assume that behavior which does not conform to these standards is unorganized and subject to no set of ethics. It is my purpose to point out that, in one particular area commonly thought to be characterized by laxness of sex behavior, there is an elaborate and highly developed sex code. A study of the social and sex life of the slum will also yield certain clues as to the nature of the process of assimilation of an alien people into American society.

My information is based upon a three-and-a-half-year study of the Italian slum district of "Cornerville" in "Eastern City." By discussions with a number of men in corner gangs, in which I was a participant observer, I was able to learn the sex code of the slum, as it appears to the corner boys.

The story must be told against a background of local social life. In peasant Italy, as in other peasant societies, the family group undertook to regulate the social and sexual relations of the children. Marriages were arranged by the parents of the couple, and no young man was allowed to visit a girl's home unless he had been accepted as her suitor. The influence of this system is still to be ob-

<sup>1</sup> A detailed report of this research will be found in "Street Corner Society," to be published by the University of Chicago Press in the fall of 1943.

served in Cornerville. Parents try to keep a strict watch upon their daughters. In most cases they are unable to arrange the marriages for their children, but they retain control over the home. The corner boy knows that if he once visits a girl in her home it will be assumed by her parents (and by everyone else) that he intends to marry her. Consequently, until he is completely sure of his own intentions, the corner boy remains outside of the house. He even hesitates to make a date with a girl, for if he does take her out alone it is assumed that he is her "steady."

Dances given by local clubs mark the high point of the social activities. Except for those who are "going steady," groups of men and groups of girls go separately to the dances. The man chooses his girl for each dance and, at the conclusion of the number, leaves her with her friends. There is no cutting in. When the dance is over, the men and women go home separately. Parties in a girl's home, picnics, evenings at the bowling alleys, and other social activities all tend to take this group form.

When a man centers his attention upon one girl, he arranges to meet her on the street corner. Good girls are not expected to "hang" on the corner, but the men consider it perfectly respectable for them to keep appointments on the corner. Most parents object to this practice

more or less strongly and try to insist that the man shall come to the home. The insistence of the parents and the reluctance of the corner boy place the girl in a difficult position. Of course, she herself may not wish to give the relationship the permanent form which a visit to the home would involve. If they work outside of the home, most girls are able to insist upon some right to govern their own social relations; but this always involves friction with the parents, its seriousness depending upon the strength of parental control and the strenuousness of the daughter's efforts to gain independence.

The sex life of the corner boy begins when he is very young. One of them writes:

In Cornerville children ten years of age know most all the swear words and they have a good idea of what the word "lay" means. Swearing and describing of sex relations by older people and by the boys that hang on the corner are overheard by little children and their actions are noticed and remembered. Many of the children when they are playing in the streets, doorways and cellars actually go through the motions which pertain to the word "lay." I have seen them going through these motions, even children under ten years of age.

Most all the boys that I know and all my friends carry safes [condoms]. Most boys start carrying safes when they are of high school age.

Safes are purchased from necktie salesmen as cheap as a dozen for fifty cents. Some boys buy them and then make a profit by selling them to the boys at school. You can get them in some of the stores around here.

The sex play of young boys is relatively unregulated. The code of sex behavior crystallizes only as the corner boys reach maturity.

Relations between corner boys and women cannot be described in uniform terms, since there are tremendous variations in behavior, depending upon the category in which the woman is placed and the man's qualifications for access to

women of various categories. The local classification of women which is explicit or implicit in corner-boy attitudes and behavior may be represented in the three categories shown in the accompanying tabulation. The most highly valued type of woman is placed at the top of each category.

Sex Experience	Physical Attractiveness	Social- and Ethnic-Group Position
1. "Good girls"	Beautiful	1 Superior groups
2. "Lays"		2. Italian nonslum
a) One-man girls	to	3. Italian slum
b) Promiscuous		
c) Prostitutes	ugly	

One evening the corner boys were discussing a beautiful girl in the neighborhood. Danny said that he would take three months in any jail in the country, even Alcatraz, for the privilege of being in bed with her for eight hours. Doc said that Danny felt this way because the girl was a virgin. Danny agreed but added: "I would take one week in any jail even if she was a lay; that's how good I think she is." The difference between three months and one week strikingly illustrates the different valuations placed upon "good girls" and "lays." Doc explained the desirability of a virgin in this way: "No one has been there before. You are showing her the way. It's a new discovery. . . . We all say we would like to lay a virgin, but we really wouldn't."

The corner-boy code strongly prohibits intercourse with a virgin. Thus the most desirable of women is also the most inaccessible. A good girl may submit to a limited amount of kisses and caresses without compromising her reputation. She must not be a "teaser" (one who attempts to excite the man as much as possible without granting him sexual access). The virginity of a "teaser" is thought to be only a technicality, and if she is raped it serves her right. Otherwise a girl's virginity must be protected.

"Good girls" are the kind that one marries. A man who takes her virginity from a "good girl," seriously affecting her marriageability, will marry her because he is responsible. The man who seeks to evade his responsibility, especially if he has made the girl pregnant, may be forced into marriage by the priest and the girl's parents. The alternative is going to jail and being held liable for the support of the child to the age of twenty-one.

While strong legal and institutional sanctions uphold virginity, corner boys do not abide by the code simply from fear of the consequences of violation. They have strong sentiments supporting the sanctity of virginity. It is felt that only the lowest type of man would have intercourse with a virgin.

If the ban on intercourse with virgins were never violated, the only nonvirgins would be girls who had had sex relations with men outside of the district. This is obviously not the case. Several stories indicate that some early-adolescent boys and girls introduce each other to sex activity. The young boy who has never had intercourse himself does not feel so strongly the protective attitude toward virgins that he will assume later. There are a few local men who break the rule, but the danger of entanglements within the district is so great that most such activity must be confined to outsiders. In any case a corner boy cannot admit having "laid" a virgin without incurring the scorn of his fellows.

The corner boys believe that a man's health requires sexual intercourse at certain intervals. "Good girls" are not available for this purpose, and even casual social relations with them are likely to lead to commitments and responsibilities that the man is not prepared to assume. The corner boy has much more freedom, and much less responsibility in dealing

with "lays"; freedom increases and responsibility decreases as he establishes relations lower down in this class.

From the standpoint of prestige and social advantage, the ideal girl in the "lay" class is the one who will have sexual relations with only one man in one period, but there are great risks involved in such a relationship. As one corner boy said:

If you go with a girl too long, even if she lays, you're bound to get to like her. That's human nature. I was going out with a girl, and I was banging her every date. After about four months, I saw I was really getting fond of the girl, so I dropped her just like that.

While a man should marry only a good girl, he may become attached to the one-man girl and allow his emotions to override his judgment. Furthermore, if it is not widely known that the girl is a "lay," and she consequently enjoys a good reputation, her family will be able to exert a good deal of pressure to force a marriage. If he makes her pregnant, marriage is hardly to be avoided.

The promiscuous girl is less desirable socially, but there is also less risk in having relations with her. Only pregnancy can impose a responsibility; and, since the identity of the father is difficult to prove, such entanglements may frequently be avoided.

In practice it is hard to distinguish between these two types of "lays," because the promiscuous girl usually tries to pass herself off as a one-man "lay" and one-man girls are constantly slipping into the lower category. Nevertheless, there is a real distinction in the mind of the corner boy, and he acts differently according to his conception of the girl's sexual status. He talks freely about the promiscuous girl and is glad to share her with his friends. He keeps the higher type of "lay" to himself, says little about his relations

with her, and treats her with more respect. The reputation of the one-man "lay" is not, however, permanently protected. If she breaks off with the corner boy and takes up with another man, the corner boy is likely to boast openly that he had her first.

The professional prostitute or "hustler" is the least desirable of women. I have heard some men advocate having relations with prostitutes on the ground that no social risk is involved; but generally the corner boys feel that to go to a house of prostitution would be to admit that they could not "pick up" any girls. One corner boy expressed his opinion in this way:

I never go to a whore house. What do you get out of that? It's too easy. You just pay and go in and get it. Do you think the girl gets any fun out of that? . . . I like to take a girl out and bull her into it [persuade her]. Then when you lay her, you know she's enjoying it too. . . . And after you're through, you feel that you have accomplished something.

Another had this to say:

You might pay a hustler a dollar and that's all there is to it, it's a business proposition. If you pick up a girl, you may spend three to five dollars on food and drinks, but I'd rather do that any time. . . . You figure, the other way, it's just a business proposition. When you go out with a girl that ain't a hustler, you figure, she must like you a little anyway or she wouldn't go out with you. A hustler will take any man she can get, but this girl is just for you tonight anyway. You take her out, have something to eat and drink, you go for a ride, you begin muggin' her up, then you get in there. . . . That's the way I like to do it. You're staking out new territory. You get the feeling you really done something when you get in there.

The corner boys make a distinction between a house of prostitution and a "line-up." In a line-up one of the men brings a prostitute to some room in the district and allows his friends to have intercourse with her, each man paying the girl for the

privilege. While this is a commercial arrangement, nevertheless, it is handled by the boys themselves, and some who would not think of going to a house of prostitution are willing to participate with their friends in a line-up.

The code not only differentiates different types of women in corner-boy attitudes; it also involves strikingly different behavior with women of the different categories, as the following stories indicate.

Danny had picked up a "hustler" and taken her to his gambling joint on the understanding that she would receive a dollar a man. When she was finished, he handed her an envelope containing the bills. She had counted the bills when he pretended to be alarmed and snatched the envelope away from her, replacing it in his pocket. She protested. Danny handed her another envelope of the same size which contained only slips of paper. She was satisfied and went away without looking into the envelope. Danny felt that he had played a clever trick upon the girl.

Doc told me another story about Danny:

There are some noble things down here, Bill. . . . You take Danny's wife, as we call her. She goes to church all the time—what a good kid she is, and she's nice looking too. She goes for Danny. She wants to marry him. Now she goes for him so much that he could probably belt her if he wanted to. But he doesn't want to marry her. He hasn't a job to support a wife. So he stays away from her. . . . Then take Al Mantia. He was a hound. He was after women all the time. One time he and Danny went out with a girl—she said she was a virgin. She had one drink, and she was a little high. They were up in a room, and they had her stripped—stripped! She still said she was a virgin, but she wanted them to give her a belt. But they wouldn't do it. . . . Can you imagine that, Bill? There she was stripped, and they wouldn't do anything to her. . . . The next day she came around and thanked both of them. They can't be such bad fellows if they do that.

The Danny who spared the virgin is the same Danny who cheated the "hustler." In one case the code imposed a strong responsibility; in the other case no responsibility was involved.

The physical-attractiveness criterion needs little comment, for here the corner boys are simply evaluating women in much the same terms as those used by men everywhere in their society. The only significant local variation is found in the strong preference for blondes in sexual relationships. Most of the local Italian girls tend to have black hair and olive complexions. While a good example of this type may appear strikingly attractive to the outsider, the corner boys are more impressed by blonde hair and a fair skin.

In the social- and ethnic-group category, the most desirable woman for non-marital sex relations is the girl of old American-stock background, preferably blonde, who has a higher status than the corner boy. Once I was walking through the aristocratic section of Eastern City with a corner boy when we passed a tall and stately blonde, fashionably dressed, and very attractive. My companion breathed deeply as he said: "The old Puritan stock! . . . The real McCoy! Wouldn't I like to give her a belt."

The attraction of the native stock is not confined to the lower-class Italian. Mario Martini was born in Cornerville, but as he became successful in business he moved out to a fashionable suburb. He married an Italian girl and raised a family, sending his children to private school. He had many business relations and some social relations with upper-class Yankees. He made a practice of hiring only girls of native background for his secretarial work, and on some of his business trips he would take one of these girls along—for sexual as well as secre-

tarial purposes. One of Martini's former secretaries, who told me this story, was a girl of rather plain features, which emphasizes the prestige of the native background even for a man who was as successful as Mario Martini.

If an old-stock American girl is not accessible, then a socially superior member of an ethnic group living outside of Cornerville is the next best thing. There is little prestige involved in having relations with a Cornerville "lay," unless she is especially attractive on a physical basis.

The three categories so far discussed give us a rating scale in terms of feminine desirability. There is one important factor which limits access to certain women, however desirable they may be in terms of these categories. We must consider the social ties between the man and the woman. The incest taboo operates in Cornerville, as elsewhere, to prohibit access to females of certain specified familial ties. While marriages may be contracted beyond these incest limits, the corner-boy code also prohibits nonmarital access to relatives who are not blood relations (for example, the brother-in-law's cousin) and to relatives of friends. A corner boy described such a case to me. He was careful to explain that his friend, the girl's cousin, knew that she was a "lay" and would have been glad to have him enjoy himself. Furthermore, the girl was chasing after him so that she was practically forcing the sex relationship upon him. When he was about to have intercourse, he thought of his friend, and, as he says, "I couldn't do a thing." It is only with an outsider, with someone who is not related to him or to a friend, that the corner boy feels free to have sexual relations.

The three categories of "Sex Experience," "Physical Attractiveness," and

"Social- or Ethnic-Group Position" are not, of course, the product of any individual's evaluation. They represent, implicitly, the standards of the group—the corner gang. The standards are being continually defined in action and in group discussion. The corner boys are continually talking over the girls that they know and others that they have observed in terms of all these categories. Consequently, a high degree of consensus tends to arise in placing the individual girl in her position in each category. The men then know how they are supposed to act in each case; and the observer, equipped with this conceptual scheme, is able to predict how, as a general rule, the men will attempt to act.

One feature of this classificatory scheme should be noted. The standards for marriage and for nonmarital sex relations are quite different. For nonmarital sex relations the ideal girl is a one-man "lay," blonde and fair skinned, belonging to a socially superior old-stock group, and having no familial connection with the corner boy or any of his friends. For marriage, preference is for the virgin of Italian extraction and having some family connection with friends or relatives of ego. (The girl fitting this description would usually, but not always, be a dark brunette.)

Different sorts of evaluation are involved in the two cases. The corner boy thinks of casual sex relations in terms of personal prestige as well as physical satisfaction. If he were able to persuade an attractive blonde to drive down to his corner and pick him up in an expensive-looking car, he could make a great impression upon his fellows. Wives are thought of in terms of long-run compatibility and utility. Corner boys express their preference for a wife of Italian extraction because "she would understand

my ways," "she would know how to cook for me," and "I could trust her more than the others"; "the Italian women make faithful wives; it's their upbringing."

The corner boy's relations with the opposite sex are not determined simply by his evaluation of feminine desirability. He must possess certain qualifications in order to gain access to the most desirable women. Talk is important. The man who can talk entertainingly and "bull the girl to her ears" gains in prestige with his fellows, as well as in his social opportunities. However, talk is not enough. Social position, money, and possession of a car weigh heavily in the balance. It is a common complaint of the corner boys that the most desirable women are most difficult of access because they demand more in position, money, and a car than most corner boys can provide. I once asked a corner boy if it was necessary to have a car in order to pick up a girl for sexual purposes. He answered:

No, you can take her up to a room. . . . But no nice girl will go up to a man's room. If you take her out in the car, that's all right. If she goes up to your room with you, she's really a bum.

Under the influence of a car, a ride in the country, drinks, and heavy petting, a girl can allow a man to have sexual intercourse with her without any premeditation on her part. But if he suggests to her that they go to a room she can no longer pretend that she does not know what he is about. By consenting, she stamps herself as the kind of girl who goes to rooms with men. Even the most promiscuous like to maintain the pretense that they do it seldom and never in such a premeditated fashion. Thus the man with a car is generally able to have intercourse with a more desirable class of women than are available to the man who must rely upon rented rooms.

If the observer can classify the corner boy in terms of these criteria and classify the women within his social orbit in terms of the categories described above, then the individual's social and sexual behavior becomes still more subject to close prediction. No invariable rules can be set up, for the corner boy's code, like all other codes, is sometimes violated; but the discussion so far should clearly indicate that the relations between the sexes in the slums are subject to definite rules of behavior. The corner boys, while deviating from respectable middle-class standards, lead an organized sex life.

Our discussion has been confined to pre-marital sex and social relations. Little change is required in order to apply our conclusions to the post-marital behavior of the corner boy. The wife is expected to be completely faithful, and even the slightest flirtations are seriously regarded. The husband is expected to be a good provider and to have an affection for his wife and children. Nevertheless, the field of sexual adventure is not barred to him, and he endeavors to keep this quite separate from his married life. While the wives object, the men see nothing wrong in extra-marital sex relations, as long as they are not carried to the extremes of an open scandal or serious neglect of the family. Within these limits, the married man looks upon the feminine world just as he did before marriage.

While the slum sex code has now been described in outline form, it remains for us to consider the effect of this code and of the behavior it involves upon some of the broader social processes.

It is not easy for the Cornerville girl to maintain a good reputation if she has social relations with Cornerville men. Once I went to a dance outside of the district with two corner boys and three girls. It was late when we drove back to

Cornerville. The driver stopped the car just outside of the district, and all the girls and one of the men got out to walk home. Later I asked why the girls had not been driven home. The driver answered:

Well, you know, Bill, the people of Cornerville are very suspicious people. They can make up a story about nothing at all. . . . If the girls came home alone, people would talk. If we all drove up in a car at one o'clock in the morning, they would wonder what we had been doing. . . . If the three of them walk home with Nutsy, then people will say, "Well, they have been in good company."

It is not only the older generation which gossips about the girls. The corner gang is continually defining and redefining reputations. Not even the "good girl" is safe from suspicion, and her local field of action is sharply circumscribed if she does not want to commit herself to marriage at an early age. As we have seen, the one-man "lay" cannot tolerate having her "boy friend" in Cornerville. . . . cause, if the relationship broke down, reputation could be destroyed.

While social life outside of Cornerville has a great appeal to most girls, those who center their activities beyond the local boundaries seem to fit largely into two categories that represent the top and the bottom of Cornerville feminine society. There are a number of "good girls" who work outside of the district and use contacts made in this way in order to move into superior social circles. Then there are the "lays," who find greater freedom elsewhere. Most of the "good girls," being limited by their backgrounds, are unable to build up a social life outside of Cornerville. They have a romantic picture of a non-Cornerville, non-Italian of superior educational and economic status who will some day come along and marry them. While the social restrictions of Cornerville weigh particu-

larly heavily upon the girls and influence many of them to wish for an escape through marriage outside the district, most marriages are contracted within Cornerville or between Cornerville and adjoining districts of similar social background. Nevertheless, the character of Cornerville social life operates to withdraw a significant number of local women from the orbit of the corner boys.

This situation is recognized by the corner boys. One of them commented:

There are lots of lays in Cornerville. You take Market Street from Norton Street down; nine out of ten of those girls will lay. But they won't lay for a Cornerville fellow. You know why? Because they figure if they lay for me, I'll tell my friends the girls lay, and they'll want to lay her, and it'll get around. . . . Can you beat it, Bill, they're all around us yet we can't get them.

My informant was disgruntled over his failure to "get" Cornerville girls, and his 90 per cent figure is not to be taken seriously. If these girls actually did go outside of the district, he was in no position to know their sexual status, and any estimate can be no more than a guess. Probably the percentage of "lays" among local girls is very small. In any case, the

fact remains that Cornerville men find most local girls barred to them except for marriage. In this situation they also must look outside of Cornerville for social and sexual satisfactions. The men, with their highly organized and localized corner gangs, tend to be even more restricted than the women in their social movements, and only a minority are able to operate at all effectively outside of Cornerville. However, even that minority contributes toward changing the social structure of Cornerville and Eastern City.

The restrictions of the peasant Italian family mores, plus the close watch kept upon their behavior, tend to push some of the young Italian girls out of Cornerville. Finding local fields restricted, some of the young men follow the girls in reaching for outside social contacts. This operates to stimulate intermarriage, illegitimate births out of interethnic sex relations, and social mobility. The study of the assimilation of the Italian population would be incomplete if we did not analyze the social and sex life of the slums in these terms.

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