According to *Time* many people “are rediscovering the traditional values of fidelity and marriage” and there is “a psychic return to pre-revolutionary days”.

**SUPERTRAMPS AND CASUALTIES**

Over the last two decades, the subject of the sexual revolution has brought much controversial grist to the mill of the popular American press. Today, the latest word from the sexual front is that the “revolution” is in its last death throes, if not already extinct. A recent article in *Time* magazine which traces the statistical rise and fall of the rebellion, records a considerable swing back to conservative values beginning in the late ‘seventies.

Many individuals are rediscovering the traditional values of fidelity and marriage. The buzz words these days are ‘commitment’, ‘intimacy’ and ‘working at relationships’. There is much talk of pendulum swings, matters coming full circle and a psychic return to pre-revolutionary days.

The American public, it seems, is shunning the delights of a liberal sexual smorgasbord in favour of a more staple diet of responsibility and commitment. Moreover, if the latest attitudinal polls are to be believed, the sexual revolution hasn’t changed much. Marriage, monogamy and the family, while enjoying a renewed popularity, continue to be founded on the old familiar sexual divisions and antagonisms. So much, then, for the revolution which promised to change our lives. But, before we rush to bury it prematurely, perhaps it is wise to ask ourselves whether that is all there is to it. Could it be that the sexual rebellion was simply a shallow and transitory product of an affluent period, so easily shelved when the economic going gets rough? Did it barely scratch the surface of convention, leaving sexual stereotypes, social expectations and social structures relatively untouched? Or, in the social turmoil of the last two decades, was something lost and something gained — and, if so, by whom? For the walking wounded, who have emerged, somewhat confused, from the fray, these crucial questions remain.

Ehrenreich’s latest book, *The Hearts of Men*, represents an important and competent effort to confront some of these questions. However, while readers will appreciate the wit and clarity of Ehrenreich’s
The Hearts of Men attempts to tackle these problems. But the solutions it offers are disappointing. Dragging old feminist chestnuts out of the fire, Ehrenreich suggests a program which includes changes in the work structure to accommodate women, extensive social support schemes and adequate child care. This package deal, as we all know, is essential to give women the financial independence they need and, some would add, is a pre-requisite for women’s liberation. But we also know, from years of feminist and socialist struggle, that lasting change in these areas requires a fundamental change in the system which thrives on dependence and powerlessness. Unfortunately, Ehrenreich’s comments here remain at the level of prescription and suggest no fresh strategies for effecting such change.

Despite this, The Hearts of Men provides a thought-provoking analysis of the dynamics and contradictions of the sexual revolution. For some, it will present a source of acute embarrassment and concern. Feminist consternation will be raised over the fact that feminist arguments supplied the ammunition for the anti-feminist backlash which successfully defeated the Equal Rights Amendment of 1982.

In short, Ehrenreich claims that men’s new-found freedom has been gained at the expense of women. This comes as no revelation to those female casualties of the sexual revolution who sustained their first losses in the divorce courts. They know, only too well, how men’s “irresponsibility” has made a mockery of child support directives and how it has increased their dependence on an inadequate welfare system. No doubt many of these women will dispute Ehrenreich’s account of the rise of men’s “irresponsibility,” preferring to see it as an intrinsic moral flaw in the male character. Nevertheless, their first-hand experience as single supporting mothers gives credence to the main thrust of her argument: that the sexual revolution which loosened the bonds of commitment and gave men the opportunity to be independent afforded no such parallel for women. Conversely, the profound changes it brought about in women’s economic role continue to go ignored by a social structure which is reluctant to recognise such changes.

In their shift away from the traditional axis of male strength and activity vs. female weakness and passivity, our modern anti-feminists were no doubt influenced by their own adversaries: Feminism, with its insistence on women’s strength and ability to take responsibility squarely onto the shoulders of women. The result has been a fundamental breakdown in the contemporary structure of the family accompanied by what Ehrenreich terms the “feminisation of poverty.” Quoting current American trends, she states:

In 1980 two out of three adults who fit into the federal definition of poverty were women, and more than half the families defined as poor were maintained by single women. In the mid-sixties and until the mid-seventies, the number of poor adult males actually declined, while the number of poor women heading households swelled by 100,000 a year (now 150,000 a year).

The feminist challenge against stereotypical roles gave the ultimate seal of approval to the male “flight from commitment.”

Ehrenreich’s argument is both persuasive and disconcerting. It implies that the sexual revolution has transformed the erstwhile male breadwinner into an errant supertramp. Released from his sense of family duty and responsibility, he has taken the open road of “moral vagrancy.” Predictably, he has left casualties behind him along the way. The collapse of the “breadwinner” ideology tempered the social constraints which obliged men to assume economic responsibility for wives and offspring, allowing them to explore a new measure of independence. At the same time, it shifted the burden of economic
In the USA in 1980 two out of three adults defined as poor were women, and between the mid-60s and mid-70s the number of poor adult males fell while the number of poor female-headed households swelled by 100,000 a year.

Finally, for many of its readers, The Hearts of Men will come as a sensible account of the social trauma which rent our lives over the last few years and added yet another dimension to the battle of the sexes. For both the men who escaped and the women who were abandoned, it provides a description of their real life experience and the forces which shaped it. In this respect it helps to explain why the hopes we held out for the sexual revolution did not eventuate: why anger, bitterness and distrust, rather than co-operation and trust, continue to dog heterosexual relationships. Ehrenreich, of course, sees the need to end these antagonisms and calls for a renewal of commitment via a rapprochement between the sexes:

Yet I would like to think that a reconciliation between the sexes is still possible. In fact, as long as we have sons as well as daughters, it will have to happen. If we cannot have — and do not want — a binding pact between the sexes, we must still have one between the generations, and that means there must be some renewal of loyalty and trust between adult men and women.

In my opinion, it is at this point that Ehrenreich's otherwise cogent argument becomes feeble, and she begins to sound like a tired feminist suffering battle fatigue. Certainly, most of us will share her dream of a reconciliation based on a feminist ethic which recognises women's needs. Whether the time is right to risk such an experiment is another matter. Clearly, the commitment she advocates requires that both sexes, putting enmity aside, explore the terrain of mutual concern and trust. Given the disparity of power which exists between the sexes, however, it is doubtful that the risks and benefits of such an exploration would come evenly distributed. For men, the restoration of women's concern and trust could only mean a consolidation of the power and trust they already enjoy. For women, it will almost certainly entail the erosion of what power they have managed to accrue during the arduous course of the "battle". Women would do well, therefore, to suspect the timeliness of Ehrenreich's call to offer the olive branch. Conserving their energy for their own struggle, they must resign themselves to the fact that the grounds for enmity between the sexes must, for the moment at least, "go unsweetened by the dream of reconciliation".

Anne Traynor teaches sociology at the University of Wollongong and is secretary of the Wollongong Women's Centre.