

I Love Lena

By Ross Douthat NYT 10/5/14

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HERE are some things you may know about **Lena Dunham**, if you happen to have opened the pages of any New York periodical at any point in the last few years. She is the **youthful impresario behind HBO's series "Girls,"** which has launched at least one think piece for every viewer in its audience; she is also the show's star, in which capacity she frequently disrobes; and she is the author of a memoir-ish new book [**Not That Kind of Girl**], which debuted to much attention last week. She is also a frequent agitator for liberal causes, most famously in the [ad](#) she cut for President Obama in 2012, which compared the experience of casting one's first vote to, well, a different sort of magical first time.

Here is something you might not know about her: She has a number of reactionary admirers.

I'm using "reactionary" rather than "Republican" advisedly: I don't mean to imply that Tea Party activists are lining up to buy "Not That Kind of Girl," Dunham's comic (sort of) foray into non-fictionalized self-exposure, or that there's a Fox News talk show waiting in her future.

But within the small (but fun!) world of cultural conservatives who watch too much HBO, Dunham has a fan base. Let me explain why.

Like most television shows about young urbanites making their way in the world, "**Girls**" is a **depiction of a culture whose controlling philosophy is what the late Robert Bellah [Habits of the Heart – Individualism and Commitment in American Life] called "expressive individualism" — the view that the key to the good life lies almost exclusively in self-discovery, self-actualization, the cultivation of the unique and holy You.**

This is a perspective with religious and political corollaries: It **implies a God-as-life-coach theology**, the kind that pulses through Oprah Winfrey's current [revival tour](#), and a politics in which the **state is effectively a therapeutic agent, protecting the questing self from shocks and deprivation.**

And to be a **cultural conservative today means, above all, regarding expressive individualism as an idea desperately in need of correction and critique.**

Often the roots of this kind of conservatism are religious, since **biblical faith takes a rather dimmer view of human nature's inner workings, a rather darker view of the unfettered self.** But the **conservative argument is also a practical one: We don't think expressive individualism actually makes people very happy.**

We have some **sociological evidence for this contention** [that individualism doesn't actually make people very happy], in the **disintegration that has proceeded apace in poorer communities** as American society has become more individualistic. But further up the income and education ladder, life is much more prosperous and stable, which means that the case against expressive individualism rests on impressions and experiences — on **hard-to-prove generalizations about narcissism, anomie** [breakdown or absence of values] and **quiet desperation among the young and well-to-do.**

Those impressions, those generalizations, are rarely reflected in pop culture.

The best of contemporary TV is dark dark dark, but it's the darkness of exotic realms — Westeros or Walter White's meth lab, mob life or deep Louisiana. The defining portraits of younger, well-educated blue-state life, from "Friends" to "Sex and the City" to their imitators, are **essentially propaganda for expressive individualism**, sometimes allowing room for nuance but never for a real critique.

Except for "Girls." The thing that makes Dunham's show so interesting, the reason it inspired a certain unsettlement among some of its early fans, is that it often **portrays young-liberal-urbanite life the way**, well, many reactionaries see it: **as a collision of narcissists educated mostly in self-love, a sexual landscape distinguished by serial humiliations — a realm at once manic and medicated, privileged and bereft of higher purpose.**

Now there is plenty of charm and fun and human interest on the show as well, and I'm quite sure that Dunham does not intend the reading I've just offered. More likely she agrees with Elaine Blair, whose New York Review of Books article [chided](#) the show's "nervous" liberal critics, and praised "Girls" for depicting the ways in which, thanks to the sexual revolution, "all of us can know more people in more ways than was ever previously allowed," with "the ultimate prize to be wrung from all of these baffling sexual predicaments" being "a deeper understanding of oneself."

This is Expressive Individualism 101. But the show is observant enough, artistic enough, to allow room for contrary interpretations. There are scenes — an extremely dark sexual encounter involving an otherwise likable male character near the end of season two — that make Blair's sexual happy-talk seem frankly absurd. There are moments — a messed-up daughter's encounter with her feckless dad, a character's rant against her close friends' self-absorption — that are almost puritanical (in a good way!) in their moral perspective.

Any reactionary affection for her work is doubtless unrequited. But it's merited, because **Dunham is doing a rare thing: She's making a show for liberals that, merely by being realistic, sharp-edge, complicated, almost gives cultural conservatism its due.**