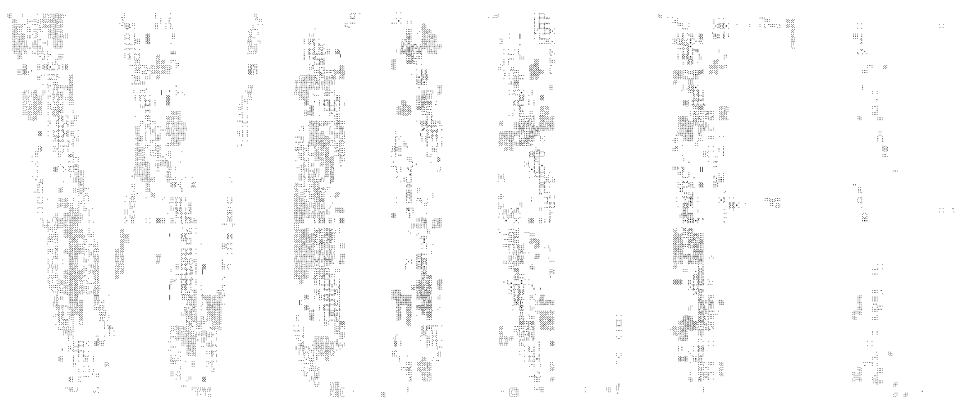




TOM

WOLFEE



FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX / NEW YORK

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
19 Union Square West, New York 10003

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Distributed in Canada by Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.
Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Abby Kagan
First edition, 2000

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Wolfe, Tom.

Hooking up / Tom Wolfe. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-374-10382-8 (alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3573.O526 H66 2000

813'.54—dc21

00-058748

Several of these pieces originally appeared, in slightly different form, in *The American Spectator*, *Esquire*, *Forbes ASAP*, *Harper's*, *New York*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The Tatler*. "Ambush at Fort Bragg" first appeared in *Rolling Stone*.

A signed first edition of this book has been privately printed by the Franklin Library.

Also by Tom Wolfe

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Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers (1970)

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The Right Stuff (1979)

In Our Time (1980)

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HOOKING UP

**Hooking Up:
What Life Was Like at the Turn
of the Second Millennium:
An American's World***



y the year 2000, the term “working class” had fallen into disuse in the United States, and “proletariat” was so obsolete it was known only to a few bitter old Marxist academics with wire hair sprouting out of their ears. The average electrician, air-conditioning mechanic, or burglar-alarm repairman lived a life that would have made the Sun King blink. He spent his vacations in Puerto Vallarta, Barbados, or St. Kitts. Before dinner he would be out on the terrace of some resort hotel with his third wife, wearing his Ricky Martin cane-cutter shirt open down to the sternum, the better to allow his gold chains to twinkle in his chest hairs. The two of them would have just ordered a round of Quibel sparkling water, from the state of West Virginia, because by 2000 the once-favored European sparkling waters Perrier and San Pellegrino seemed so tacky.

*With a tip of the hat to Robert Lacey and Danny Danziger and their delightful book *The Year 1000: What Life Was Like at the Turn of the First Millennium: An Englishman's World* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1999).

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European labels no longer held even the slightest snob appeal except among people known as “intellectuals,” whom we will visit in a moment. Our typical mechanic or tradesman took it for granted that things European were second-rate. Aside from three German luxury automobiles—the Mercedes-Benz, the BMW, and the Audi—he regarded European-manufactured goods as mediocre to shoddy. On his trips abroad, our electrician, like any American businessman, would go to superhuman lengths to avoid being treated in European hospitals, which struck him as little better than those in the Third World. He considered European hygiene so primitive that to receive an injection in a European clinic voluntarily was sheer madness.

Indirectly, subconsciously, his views perhaps had to do with the fact that his own country, the United States, was now the mightiest power on earth, as omnipotent as Macedon under Alexander the Great, Rome under Julius Caesar, Mongolia under Genghis Khan, Turkey under Mohammed II, or Britain under Queen Victoria. His country was so powerful, it had begun to invade or rain missiles upon small nations in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean for no other reason than that their leaders were lording it over their subjects at home.

Our air-conditioning mechanic had probably never heard of Saint-Simon, but he was fulfilling Saint-Simon’s and the other nineteenth-century utopian socialists’ dreams of a day when the ordinary workingman would have the political and personal freedom, the free time and the wherewithal to express himself in any way he saw fit and to unleash his full potential. Not only that, any ethnic or racial group—*any*, even recent refugees from a Latin country—could take over the government of any American city, if they had the votes and a modicum of organization. Americans could boast of a freedom as well as a power unparalleled in the history of the world.

Our typical burglar-alarm repairman didn’t display one erg of chauvinistic swagger, however. He had been numbed by the aforementioned “intellectuals,” who had spent the preceding eighty years being indignant over what a “puritanical,” “repressive,” “bigoted,” “capitalistic,” and “fascist” nation America was beneath its democratic façade. It

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made his head hurt. Besides, he was too busy coping with what was known as the “sexual revolution.” If anything, “sexual revolution” was rather a prim term for the lurid carnival actually taking place in the mightiest country on earth in the year 2000. Every magazine stand was a riot of bare flesh, rouged areolae, moistened crevices, and stiffened giblets: boys with girls, girls with girls, boys with boys, bare-breasted female bodybuilders, so-called boys with breasts, riding backseat behind steroid-gorged bodybuilding bikers, naked except for *cache-sexes* and Panzer helmets, on huge chromed Honda or Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

But the magazines were nothing compared with what was offered on an invention of the 1990s, the Internet. By 2000, an estimated 50 percent of all hits, or “log-ons,” were at Web sites purveying what was known as “adult material.” The word “pornography” had disappeared down the memory hole along with “proletariat.” Instances of marriages breaking up because of Web-sex addiction were rising in number. The husband, some fifty-two-year-old MRI technician or systems analyst, would sit in front of the computer for twenty-four or more hours at a stretch. Nothing that the wife could offer him in the way of sexual delights or food could compare with the one-handing he was doing day and night as he sat before the PC and logged on to such images as a girl with bare breasts and a black leather corset standing with one foot on the small of a naked boy’s back, brandishing a whip.

In 1999, the year before, this particular sexual kink—sado-masochism—had achieved not merely respectability but high chic, and the word “perversion” had become as obsolete as “pornography” and “proletariat.” Fashion pages presented the black leather and rubber paraphernalia as style’s cutting edge. An actress named Rene Russo blithely recounted in the Living section of one of America’s biggest newspapers how she had consulted a former dominatrix named Eva Norvind, who maintained a dungeon replete with whips and chains and assorted baffling leather masks, chokers, and cuffs, in order to prepare for a part as an aggressive, self-obsessed agent provocateur in *The Thomas Crown Affair*, Miss Russo’s latest movie.

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“Sexy” was beginning to replace “chic” as the adjective indicating what was smart and up-to-the-minute. In the year 2000, it was standard practice for the successful chief executive officer of a corporation to shuck his wife of two to three decades’ standing for the simple reason that her subcutaneous packing was deteriorating, her shoulders and upper back were thickening like a shot-putter’s—in short, she was no longer sexy. Once he set up the old wife in a needlepoint shop where she could sell yarn to her friends, he was free to take on a new wife, a “trophy wife,” preferably a woman in her twenties, and preferably blond, as in an expression from that time, a “lemon tart.” What was the downside? Was the new couple considered radioactive socially? Did people talk *sotto voce*, behind the hand, when the tainted pair came by? Not for a moment. All that happened was that everybody got on the cell phone or the Internet and rang up or E-mailed one another to find out the spelling of the new wife’s first name, because it was always some name like Serena and nobody was sure how to spell it. Once that was written down in the little red Scully & Scully address book that was so popular among people of means, the lemon tart and her big CEO catch were invited to all the parties, as though nothing had happened.

Meanwhile, sexual stimuli bombarded the young so incessantly and intensely they were inflamed with a randy itch long before reaching puberty. At puberty the dams, if any were left, burst. In the nineteenth century, entire shelves used to be filled with novels whose stories turned on the need for women, such as Anna Karenina or Madame Bovary, to remain chaste or to maintain a façade of chastity. In the year 2000, a Tolstoy or a Flaubert wouldn’t have stood a chance in the United States. From age thirteen, American girls were under pressure to maintain a façade of sexual experience and sophistication. Among girls, “virgin” was a term of contempt. The old term “dating”—referring to a practice in which a boy asked a girl out for the evening and took her to the movies or dinner—was now deader than “proletariat” or “pornography” or “perversion.” In junior high school, high school, and college, girls headed out in packs in the evening, and boys headed out in packs, hoping to meet each other fortuitously. If they met and some

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girl liked the looks of some boy, she would give him the nod, or he would give her the nod, and the two of them would retire to a halfway-private room and “hook up.”

“Hooking up” was a term known in the year 2000 to almost every American child over the age of nine, but to only a relatively small percentage of their parents, who, even if they heard it, thought it was being used in the old sense of “meeting” someone. Among the children, hooking up was always a sexual experience, but the nature and extent of what they did could vary widely. Back in the twentieth century, American girls had used baseball terminology. “First base” referred to embracing and kissing; “second base” referred to groping and fondling and deep, or “French,” kissing, commonly known as “heavy petting”; “third base” referred to fellatio, usually known in polite conversation by the ambiguous term “oral sex”; and “home plate” meant conception-mode intercourse, known familiarly as “going all the way.” In the year 2000, in the era of hooking up, “first base” meant deep kissing (“tonsil hockey”), groping, and fondling; “second base” meant oral sex; “third base” meant going all the way; and “home plate” meant learning each other’s names.

Getting to home plate was relatively rare, however. The typical Filofax entry in the year 2000 by a girl who had hooked up the night before would be: “Boy with black Wu-Tang T-shirt and cargo pants: O, A, 6.” Or “Stupid cock diesel”—slang for a boy who was muscular from lifting weights—“who kept saying, ‘This is a cool deal’: TTC, 3.” The letters referred to the sexual acts performed (e.g., TTC for “that thing with the cup”), and the Arabic number indicated the degree of satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10.

In the year 2000, girls used “score” as an active verb indicating sexual conquest, as in: “The whole thing was like very sketchy, but I scored that diesel who said he was gonna go home and caff up [drink coffee in order to stay awake and study] for the psych test.” In the twentieth century, only boys had used “score” in that fashion, as in: “I finally scored with Susan last night.” That girls were using such a locution points up one of the ironies of the relations between the sexes in the year 2000.

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The continuing vogue of feminism had made sexual life easier, even insouciant, for men. Women had been persuaded that they should be just as active as men when it came to sexual advances. Men were only too happy to accede to the new order, since it absolved them of all sense of responsibility, let alone chivalry. Men began to adopt formerly feminine attitudes when the subject of marriage came up, pleading weakness and indecisiveness, as in: "I don't know; I'm just not ready yet" or "Of course I love you, but like, you know, I start weirding out when I try to focus on it."

With the onset of puberty, males were able to get sexual enjoyment so easily, so casually, that junior high schools as far apart geographically and socially as the slums of the South Bronx and Washington's posh suburbs of Arlington and Talbot County, Virginia, began reporting a new discipline problem. Thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls were getting down on their knees and fellating boys in corridors and stairwells during the two-minute break between classes. One thirteen-year-old in New York, asked by a teacher how she could do such a thing, replied: "It's nasty, but I need to satisfy my man." Nasty was an aesthetic rather than a moral or hygienic judgment. In the year 2000, boys and girls did not consider fellatio to be a truly sexual act, any more than tonsil hockey. It was just "fooling around." The President of the United States at the time used to have a twenty-two-year-old girl, an unpaid volunteer in the presidential palace, the White House, come around to his office for fellatio. He later testified under oath that he had never "had sex" with her. Older Americans tended to be shocked, but junior-high-school, high-school, and college students understood completely what he was saying and wondered what on earth all the fuss was about. The two of them had merely been on second base, hooking up.

Teenage girls spoke about their sex lives to total strangers without the least embarrassment or guile. One New York City newspaper sent out a man-on-the-street interviewer with the question: "How did you lose your virginity?" Girls as well as boys responded without hesitation, posed for photographs, and divulged their name, age, and the neighborhood where they lived.

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Stains and stigmas of every kind were disappearing where sex was concerned. Early in the twentieth century the term “cohabitation” had referred to the forbidden practice of a man and woman living together before marriage. In the year 2000, nobody under forty had ever heard of the word, since cohabitation was now the standard form of American courtship. For parents over forty, one of the thornier matters of etiquette concerned domestic bed assignments. When your son or daughter came home for the weekend with the live-in consort, did you put the two of them in the same bedroom, which would indicate implicit approval of the discomfiting *fait accompli*? Or did you put them in different bedrooms and lie awake, rigid with insomnia, fearful of hearing muffled footfalls in the hallway in the middle of the night?

Putting them in different rooms was a decidedly old-fashioned thing to do; and in the year 2000, thanks to the feverish emphasis on sex and sexiness, nobody wanted to appear old, let alone old-fashioned. From the city of Baltimore came reports of grandmothers having their eyebrows, tongues, and lips pierced with gold rings in order to appear younger, since body-piercing was a popular fashion among boys and girls in their teens and early twenties. Expectant mothers were having their belly buttons pierced with gold rings so that the shapelessness of pregnancy would not make them feel old. An old man who had been a prominent United States senator and a presidential candidate, emerged from what he confessed to have been a state of incapacity to go on television to urge other old men to take a drug called Viagra to free them from what he said was one of the scourges of modern times, the disease that dared not speak its name: impotence. He dared not speak it, either. He called it “E.D.,” for erectile dysfunction. Insurance companies were under pressure to classify impotence in old men as a disease and to pay for treatment.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, old people in America had prayed, “Please, God, don’t let me look poor.” In the year 2000, they prayed, “Please, God, don’t let me look old.” Sexiness was equated with youth, and youth ruled. The most widespread age-related disease was not senility but juvenility. The social ideal was to look

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twenty-three and dress thirteen. All over the country, old men and women were dressing casually at every opportunity, wearing jeans, luridly striped sneakers, shorts, T-shirts, polo shirts, jackets, and sweaters, heedless of how such clothes revealed every sad twist, bow, hump, and webbed-up vein clump of their superannuated bodies. For that matter, in the year 2000, people throughout American society were inverting norms of dress that had persisted for centuries, if not millennia. Was the majesty of America's global omnipotence reflected in the raiments of the rich and prominent? Quite the opposite. In the year 2000, most American billionaires—and the press no longer took notice of men worth a mere \$500 million or \$750 million—lived in San Jose and Santa Clara Counties, California, an area known nationally, with mythic awe, as the Silicon Valley, the red-hot center of the computer and Internet industries. In 1999, the Internet industry alone had produced fourteen new billionaires. The Valley's mythology was full of the sagas of young men who had gone into business for themselves, created their own companies straight out of college, or, better still, had dropped out of college to launch their "start-ups," as these new digital-age enterprises were known. Such were the new "Masters of the Universe," a term coined in the eighties to describe the (mere) megamillionaires spawned by Wall Street during a boom in the bond business. By comparison with the Valley's boy billionaires, the Wall Streeters, even though they were enjoying a boom in the stock market in the year 2000, seemed slow and dreary. Typically, they graduated from college, worked for three years as number-crunching donkeys in some large investment-banking firm, went off to business school for two years to be certified as Masters of Business Administration, then returned to some investment-banking firm and hoped to start making some real money by the age of thirty. The stodginess of such a career was symbolized by the stodginess of their dress. Even the youngest of them dressed like old men: the dark blah suit, the light blah shirt, the hopelessly "interesting" Hermès tie . . . Many of them even wore silk braces.

The new Masters of the Universe turned all that upside down. At Il Fornaio restaurant in Palo Alto, California, where they gathered to tell

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war stories and hand out business cards at breakfast, the billionaire founders of the new wonder corporations walked in the door looking like well-pressed, well-barbered beachcombers, but beachcombers all the same. They wore khakis, boating moccasins (without socks), and ordinary cotton shirts with the cuffs rolled up and the front unbuttoned to the navel, and that was it. You could tell at a glance that a Silicon Valley billionaire carried no cell phone, Palm Pilot, HP-19B calculator, or RIM pager—he had people who did that for him. Having breakfast with him at Il Fornaio would be a vice president whose net worth was \$100 or \$200 million. He would be dressed just like the founder, except that he would also be wearing a sport jacket. Why? So that he could carry . . . the cell phone, the Palm Pilot, the HP-19B calculator, and the RIM pager, which received E-mail and felt big as a brick. But why not an attaché case? Because that was what old-fashioned businessmen Back East carried. Nobody would be caught dead at Il Fornaio carrying an attaché case. The Back East attaché case was known scornfully as “the leather lunch pail.”

When somebody walked into Il Fornaio wearing a suit and tie, he was likely to be mistaken for a maître d'. In the year 2000, as in prior ages, service personnel, such as doormen, chauffeurs, waiters, and maître d's, were expected to wear the anachronistic finery of bygone eras. In Silicon Valley, wearing a tie was a mark of shame that indicated you were everything a Master of the Universe was not. Gradually, it would dawn on you. The poor devil in the suit and tie held one of those lowly but necessary executive positions, in public or investor relations, in which one couldn't avoid dealing with Pliocene old parties from . . . Back East.

Meanwhile, back East, the sons of the old rich were deeply involved in inverted fashions themselves. One of the more remarkable sights in New York City in the year 2000 was that of some teenage scion of an investment-banking family emerging from one of the forty-two Good Buildings, as they were known. These forty-two buildings on Manhattan's East Side contained the biggest, grandest, stateliest apartments ever constructed in the United States, most of them on Park and Fifth

Hooking Up

Avenues. A doorman dressed like an Austrian Army colonel from the year 1870 holds open the door, and out comes a wan white boy wearing a baseball cap sideways; an outsized T-shirt, whose short sleeves fall below his elbows and whose tail hangs down over his hips; baggy cargo pants with flapped pockets running down the legs and a crotch hanging below his knees, and yards of material pooling about his ankles, all but obscuring the Lugz sneakers. This fashion was deliberately copied from the “homeys”—black youths on the streets of six New York slums, Harlem, the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Fort Greene, South Ozone Park, and East New York. After passing the doorman, who tipped his visored officer’s hat and said “Good day,” the boy walked twenty feet to a waiting sedan, where a driver with a visored officer’s hat held open a rear door.

What was one to conclude from such a scene? The costumes said it all. In the year 2000, the sons of the rich, the very ones in line to inherit the bounties of the all-powerful United States, were consumed by a fear of being envied. A German sociologist of the period, Helmut Schoeck, said that “fear of being envied” was the definition of guilt. But if so, guilt about what? So many riches, so much power, such a dazzling array of advantages? American superiority in all matters of science, economics, industry, politics, business, medicine, engineering, social life, social justice, and, of course, the military was total and indisputable. Even Europeans suffering the pangs of wounded chauvinism looked on with awe at the brilliant example the United States had set for the world as the third millennium began. And yet there was a cloud on the millennial horizon.

America had shown the world the way in every area save one. In matters intellectual and artistic, she remained an obedient colony of Europe. American architecture had never recovered from the deadening influence of the German Bauhaus movement of the twenties. American painting and sculpture had never recovered from the deadening influence of various theory-driven French movements, beginning with Cubism early in the twentieth century. In music, the early-twentieth-century innovations of George Gershwin, Aaron Copland,