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Will Marriage Disappear?¹

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The origins of marriage in human history are murky. In the West, religiously sanctioned weddings were restricted to the wealthy and privileged until the Catholic Church began to rethink its policy of confining the sacrament of matrimony to the aristocracy and the propertied classes during the Renaissance. Before then, common-law arrangements were honored by the community, but it is difficult to determine just how widespread and longstanding marital bonds existed among commoners. The colonization of marriage by the church was an historical and political process that culminated in a Western model of matrimony that varied somewhat in form and function by place and over time. The timing of marriage was markedly different, for example, in Eastern and Western Europe. Patterns of co-residence among generations differed in Southern and Northern Europe, influencing the degree of autonomy permitted to young people in mate selection.

Contrary to popular belief among Americans, marriage practices have always been adapted to fit prevailing economic and demographic conditions in particular localities; there is no distant past in which so-called “traditional” marriage prevailed in the Western world. Even in the United States, where it is sometimes claimed that a conjugal-based marriage system (i.e., strong emotional bonds between husband and wife) has existed since our founding, abundant evidence exists of regional, religious, and social class variations in marriage patterns from the colonial period onward. To take but one example, rates of premarital pregnancy have varied greatly depending on location and historical period.

Needless to say, this historical perspective is frequently absent in contemporary discussions of what is happening to marriage and, more broadly, the way that family life is organized today. Political observers from both the left and the right tend to impose a moral perspective on how families should operate, and discussions of changing marriage practices have been tinged with erroneous or partial impressions of both marriage past and marriage present. For example, premarital

1 Read 29 April 2011.

chastity was widely promoted but only partially adhered to throughout the history of the United States.

It is irresistible, but very hazardous, to project into the future a view of marriage and family life based on what exists today. No sociological or demographic data permit us to forecast what the family will look like at the end of the current century. We (social scientists) must be modest in our ability to imagine, much less project, the future of the family.

The central aim of the current essay is to provide an account of how we got from the model of the twentieth-century family that prevailed in the post-war era (1945–65) to the present time, when many observers are lamenting the changes that have taken place during the final third of the last century. In a matter of five decades, we have gone from an era when almost everyone got married and had children to the present when marriage has become ever more selective and child-bearing ever more elective. As many as one-quarter of young adults today will never enter formal marriage and nearly that many (whether they marry or not) will be childless. How did this rapid and dramatic shift come about, and is it likely to continue in the near future?

Until the end of the nineteenth century, most Americans continued to work in agriculture, and the family remained a center of both production and reproduction. Fertility continued to be quite robust until the nineteenth century, when it began to decline both here and in virtually all Western nations. Multigenerational households were never a common family form in the United States, although parents and children often co-resided for a time and often late in life. Marriage launched young adults into separate households, a practice that remained fairly standard after World War II.

During the Depression and through World War II, family formation was constrained first by economic conditions and later by the mobilization of young adults. When the troops came home, there was literally a rush to marry, the likes of which we have not seen before or since. The rate of marriage soared in the aftermath of the war as couples couldn't wait to walk down the aisle. The marriage rush was accompanied by the much heralded baby boom that produced a marked rise in the birth rate, which lasted almost 20 years. Throughout that period, the nuclear family (i.e., husband, wife, and children) was in ascendancy. Hard as it is to fathom today, the median age of marriage for women dropped from almost 26 at the beginning of the twentieth century to just over 20 by 1957. A very high proportion of these younger brides became pregnant before they wed, and many younger couples struggled to make ends meet even in a booming economy.

The rush into marriage and fertility put tremendous strain on couples, thus leading, many observers believe, to a rising rate of divorce.

Divorces spiked in the late 1940s because couples, especially in the post-war era, often divorced not long after they married, and the rate of divorce rose steadily and substantially from the 1950s to the late 1970s, by which time the marriage age had begun to rise and a new pattern of family formation began to emerge.

The post-war period in which the nuclear family was the dominant form is now recalled with considerable nostalgia by many. It is often referred to as “the traditional family” even though it was fairly short-lived. The model of the family was built around the ideal of a “companionate” marriage. Two people came together, and they merged their interest and made a common union: the formula might be expressed as “1 + 1 = 1.” In certain respects, it was a very effective form of the family, but it was also a controlling structure because of its reliance on a sharply defined, gender-based division of labor. Men worked outside the home, and women mostly assumed a domestic role, organizing the household and caring for children. This pattern was upset during the war when many women were drawn into the labor force because of the shortage of prime-age male workers. In the decades immediately following the war, most couples resumed the pattern of a single-wage earner, who was almost always the male. (Nonetheless, during the two decades after the war, single and formerly married women, a then-increasing population, were generally employed, although those numbers would represent only a tiny fraction of today’s population of such women.)

Looking back now with the benefit of hindsight, it is not so difficult to see the strains introduced by this social form, which relied on rigid division of labor. Beginning in the late 1950s, rising standards of consumption began to put pressure on families to expand their incomes beyond wage growth, leading more married women to enter the labor force after their children became of school age in that decade and the following one. Many women had worked for a time before they married and had children, but beginning in the late 1970s, more women began to remain in the labor force, working either full- or part-time even after they had children.

The model of what social scientists call “the gender-based division of labor” revealed a lingering patriarchal system that encouraged the belief that women lacked the skills and temperament to deal with employment outside the home and were better suited for childcare. The system encouraged and sanctioned the sharply drawn division of labor that prevailed at the time. And, of course, the reverse was true for men, who were blithely dismissed as caregivers for children. To be sure, critics of the family system existed, such as Philip Wylie who, in his book *Generation of Vipers*, attacked the amount of control that

mothers exerted over their children, claiming that they suffocated the development of their offspring.

It is no exaggeration to say that marriage in the 1940s and 1950s was propelled by sex. Couples frequently engaged in sexual relations before marriage, anticipating that if pregnancy occurred, they would be compelled to wed. One social scientist described this pattern as part of the courtship system. Close to one-third of all marriages were preceded by a pregnancy. Entering marriage via premarital pregnancy was especially true for young women. Close to one-half of all women were married by the age of 20 in the 1950s—men, by the age of 23. Many couples scarcely knew each other when they wed; the median length of courtship was about 6 months, an astounding fact that has all but disappeared from popular recollection.

Marriage had played a very important role in the transition to adulthood. It was partly because of the enticing goal of having sex but partly because of the ideal of autonomy and early adulthood. Marriage was the mainspring that triggered a series of transitions: leaving home, establishing one's own home, and starting a family, all of which occurred in a very rapid manner in the 1950s. Thus, by their early 20s, most young men and women were adult in every sense of the word; they were independent earners, had moved out of their natal households, had set up their own households, and had children.

What ultimately undermined this model of marriage and family formation? A number of conditions simultaneously occurring in the mid-1960s. A package of structural changes in the economy and demographic changes produced by the large up-tick in marriage and fertility after World War II, all accompanied by a rapid shift in cultural values, began to undermine existing family practices that had been widely observed in the United States and other industrialized nations. In isolation, none of the structural or cultural changes occurring in the 1960s could have overthrown the existing family regime, but together, they were a powerful force that began to upset the family system as we once knew it.

First, the labor market for young adults, especially those with limited educational attainment began to change. Manufacturing jobs moved off shore, and well-paying union jobs that abounded in the 1950s and 1960s first began to decline in the late 1960s and continued a precipitous drop in the following two decades, reversing the relatively good position that young adults occupied in the labor market following World War II.

The expansion of education meant that employers began to expect higher education attainment of new recruits, leaving poor whites and minorities in a tenuous position when it came to finding remunerative employment. Young adults who were not college bound began to

experience difficulties finding employment, especially in the aftermath of the oil crisis in the early 1970s.

As the entrance to adulthood became later, the link between sexual initiation and marriage was frayed. The changes in sexual practices were undoubtedly a consequence and a cause of the rising age of marriage. At the same time, the availability of reliable methods of contraception for women allowed young couples to engage in sex with the expectation that they would not become pregnant. Of course, many did, but after 1973 when the Supreme Court legalized abortion, there was another way of dealing with an unplanned pregnancy.

Early marriage was no longer in vogue in the final decades of the last century. Cohabitation had always occurred, but until 1970s, it had been socially invisible. In the early 1970s, *The New York Times* announced that a couple at Columbia and Barnard was living together, heralding a new adaptation that made early marriage virtually obsolete. In a matter of a few short decades, cohabitation became widespread both in the United States and Europe. By the end of the century, early marriage in this country became a rare event. Cohabitation permitted couples to experiment with living together without making a “life-long” commitment.

The breakdown of the strict gender-based division of labor occurred nearly as swiftly. Single women had long stayed in the labor force, leaving it when they married and had children. The pressures on working-class and middle-income families grew as men’s wages began to stagnate. In the latter decades of the last century, married women and women with young children gradually remained in the labor force for longer periods of time, producing more families with dual careers, or at least two full-time jobs. In the new millennium, there is growing evidence from time-use studies that women are cutting back on domestic duties, men are taking on more childcare, and the family is becoming more symmetrical in form and function.

These changes in the structure and meaning of marriage have led to a new model of marriage that is widely practiced among the highly educated. Marriage has become more, not less, stable in part because there has been an increase in homophily (i.e., like marrying like). Age differences between partners have dropped, and it is more likely today that college-educated men and women will marry each other. This pattern has resulted in growing marital stability among the highly educated. As an ideal, the new form of marriage among the well-educated is symmetrical. It is captured by a change in the formula from “ $1 + 1 = 1$ ” to “ $1 + 1 = 3$ (i.e., you, me, and us).”

Among the least educated in the United States, the pattern is quite different. Although marriage remains an ideal for poor and working-class

couples, it is perceived as less attainable. Couples are more likely to remain in cohabiting unions and defer marriage until they can satisfy what they perceive to be the more daunting qualifications for matrimony—that is, regular employment and the prospect of some measure of economic security. Since the Great Recession of 2008, marriage rates in the bottom two-thirds of the population have continued to drop. In effect, the United States now has a two-tiered family system. Among the privileged, marriage remains the bedrock of family formation. Only a tiny fraction of college-educated couples, now both gay and straight, will never marry. Most will have children only after they marry and are more likely to remain together than they were in past decades. Their children will have the advantages of growing up in a stable, economically secure, two-parent union

However, for the less educated—those who do not finish high school or stop their education at graduation—family life has become less stable. Couples are more likely to move from one co-habitational union to the next, and often children grow up in a succession of family arrangements. Only a minority will grow up in unions formed by marriage or live with the same parent figures continuously. These family patterns are a consequence of unstable, economic conditions and a poor labor market for unskilled workers. The family system is typically more complex because it potentially involves parents having to allocate scarce resources to children from past and current partnerships. Children, in turn, are likely to see parent figures (more likely their fathers) come and go. A growing percentage of children in families with less educated parents have half-siblings, who they acquire as their parents form new partnerships.

This two-tiered family system is contributing to the pattern of growing inequality and is establishing barriers to social mobility in the United States. Unless a drastic change occurs in labor market prospects for the less educated, we are likely to witness more economic inequality in the immediate future. The decline of marriage, at least in the United States, is likely to continue without a powerful policy intervention.

Can marriage be restored in the United States for families of limited means? Predictions are hazardous, but it seems likely that a greater measure of prosperity for low- and middle-income families is required by either promoting economic growth to generate better paying jobs or changing our tax system to increase the benefits of work among those with low-income jobs. Unless one or the other (or both) of these changes occurs, marriage is not likely to make a comeback among the poor and near-poor.