

The World Historical Transformation of Marriage

For the past several years, I have had the disconcerting but exhilarating privilege of ranging back and forth over a time span of 5,000 years in my readings on marriage and family life. In the book I am just finishing on the history of marriage, I have pushed my studies further back into the past than I have ever ventured before. But as the national cochair and press liaison for the Council on Contemporary Families, it was also my job to stay on top of the exciting new research that appears in journals such as this one. Being able to combine these two projects has helped me gain a better perspective on both the historical trends in marriage and the contemporary debates about its future.

I have spent much of my career as a historian explaining to people that many things that seem new in family life are actually quite traditional. Two-provider families, for example, were the norm through most of history. Stepfamilies were more numerous in much of history than they are today. There have been several times and places when cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births, or nonmarital sex were more widespread than they are today. Divorce was higher in Malaysia during the 1940s and 1950s than it is today in the United States. Even same-sex marriage, though comparatively rare, has been accepted in some cultures under certain conditions.

Similarly, many societies have had a very casual attitude toward what deserves recognition as a marriage. The “tradition” that marriage has to be licensed by the state or sanctified by the church is more recent than most people

assume. In ancient Rome, for example, the difference between cohabitation and legal marriage was entirely subjective. It depended solely upon the partners’ intent. And I am more than a little bemused when people talk about the traditional sanctity of the Christian wedding ceremony. For more than a thousand years, the Catholic church took the position that if a man and woman claimed that they had exchanged words of consent, whether in the kitchen or out by the haystack, then they were married.

In the process of writing this book, however, I have shifted my focus. I still believe that when it comes to any particular practice or variation on marriage, there is really nothing new under the sun. But when we look at the larger picture, it is clear that the social role and mutual relationship of marriage, divorce, and singlehood in the contemporary world is qualitatively different from anything to be found in the past. Almost any separate way of organizing caregiving, childrearing, residential arrangements, sexual interactions, or interpersonal redistribution of resources has been tried by some society at some point in time. But the coexistence in *one* society of so many alternative ways of doing all of these different things—and the comparative legitimacy accorded to many of them—has never been seen before.

The contemporary revolution in marriage and family life is what historians sometimes call an *overdetermined* phenomenon—something that has so many separate causes and aspects that getting rid of one, two, or even several elements of the change would not reverse it. Divorce and single parenthood have both been common in many societies in the past, but they almost never coexisted with the right of women to initiate the divorce, or the ability of so many

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single women to actually support themselves and their children. The extraordinary increase in the economic independence and legal equality of women has reshaped the social landscape of family life. It has put a new spin on almost every contemporary aspect of marriage (and of nonmarriage), even if some of our contemporary features superficially resemble something in the past. The rise of new forms and patterns of cohabitation has had similar far-reaching effects, as many contributors to this issue point out. And the legal gains for unmarried heterosexual and same-sex partners have challenged the ways that marriage traditionally organized people's rights and responsibilities on the basis of biology and gender.

But marriage has also been transformed by the behavior of married people who will never divorce, and by the actions of heterosexual singles who would never consider having a child out of wedlock. The reproductive revolution, for example, was pioneered by married couples eager to overcome their infertility. Yet it transformed all of the traditionally taken-for-granted relationships between marriage, sex, conception, childbirth, and parenting, allowing individuals to become parents who would never have been able to do so before. They can have those children in such bewildering combinations that a child can theoretically have five different parents (a sperm donor, an egg donor, a birth mother, and the social parents who raise the child). And that count does not reckon with any later complications introduced by divorce and remarriage!

An even more revolutionary innovation is the increasingly common option of not having any children at all. A large proportion of people who marry today will never have children, not because of infertility, but because they choose to remain childless. This is a huge change from the past, when childlessness was an economic disaster and often led to divorce even when the couple would have preferred to stay together.

The many young people who are delaying marriage until their late 20s or early 30s also contribute to the lessened role of marriage in organizing social and personal life. These young people are not necessarily antimarriage. Often, they delay marriage because they are very antidivorce. But the long period of life when they live on their own, with full access to the rights and privileges of adulthood, reduces the social weight that marriage exerts in society.

Today, unlike many periods in history, almost any heterosexual is free to marry. But marriage is no longer necessary to activate one's property rights, legal standing, public roles, and social status. The large pool of people who remain single for years but who are still allowed to assume adult roles challenges the ways that Europeans and Americans have organized social life for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. This challenge would exist even if everyone eventually married and the divorce rate dropped back to the levels of the 1950s.

The expansion of solitary living in contemporary Western societies has been staggering. In 1950, just 10% of all households in Europe contained only one person. Five decades later, one-person households made up slightly more than one quarter of all households in the United States, 30% of all British households, and 40% of all Swedish households. Greece had the lowest percentage of one-person households in Europe at the end of the 20th century. But even there, one-person households represented almost 20% of the total, twice the 1950 average for Europe as a whole.

Never before have so many people lived alone. And never before have unmarried people, living alone or in couples, had the same rights as married adults. The lessened importance of marriage in organizing people's life cycles and assumption of adult responsibilities changes the experience of all people who marry, no matter how "traditional" they hope that marriage will be.

When I look at contemporary debates about what is happening to marriage through this historical lens, I am struck by how often the "optimistic" and the "pessimistic" predictions of the future are based on what are in many ways secondary or surface fluctuations taking place above the more long-range subterranean changes in family life. In the mid-1990s, the consensus among popular commentators was that marriage was dying. The dramatic jump in the proportion of cohabiting couples between 1990 and 1996 was projected into the future, generating the forecast that marriage would be extinct in 30 years. Trends in single-mother families led to predictions of a "fatherless" America.

Then at the end of the 1990s, commentators found a number of signs that led them to hope that the pace of change in marriage arrangements and family life was slowing down and

even in some cases reversing. Divorce rates fell in the United States and Britain. In the United States, young men in the 1990s expressed more support for marriage than their same-age counterparts had in the 1970s. The late 1990s saw an uptick in the number of impoverished children living with two adults instead of one. A study of more than 10,000 American high school students reported that 48% had engaged in sexual intercourse in 1997, down from 54% in 1991. Teens who did engage in sex were more likely to use condoms during the 1990s, which produced a decline in the abortion rate and in sexually transmitted diseases (Ellman, 2000; Risman & Schwartz, 2002; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

All of this was heady news to many observers. "Abstinence: the Next Teen Thing," announced the teasers for a local television program in my area. The head of one institute aimed at restoring "traditional" American family values wrote hopefully that "after more than three decades of relentless advance, the family structure revolution in the U.S. may be over" (Blankenhorn, 2001).

In a 1997 survey of 10 European countries, demographers Anton Kuijsten and Klaus Strohmeier found several trends suggesting that the "de-traditionalization" of marriage and family life had reached its limits. They noted that countries that had lagged in family change during the 1970s and 1980s were still catching up in the 1990s, with increases in divorce rates and the age of first marriage, and decreases in male breadwinner families and birth rates. But countries that had led the way in family change during the 1970s and 1980s, they claimed, "seem to be over the hill and have started their way back" (Kuijsten & Strohmeier, 1997).

Perhaps the most excitement of all was generated by a single statistic from the United States census indicating that between 1998 and 2000, the labor force participation of women with babies dropped for the first time in a quarter century. The Census Bureau reported that as of June 2000, 55% of women with infants under 1 year old were in the work force, a decline from 59% in 1998 (Lewin, 2001). The *New York Times Magazine*, combining Census Bureau statistics with a few anecdotes about high-achieving women who quit their jobs, announced the arrival of "The Opt-Out Revolution" among working moms (Belkin, 2003). And as I write this article, I have on my desk

six other media reports about how working moms are rediscovering the joys of staying home.

On closer inspection, of course, none of these trends presages any return to so-called "traditional" marriages and family life. Divorce rates have been falling, yes, but in many countries, marriage rates have been falling even more. The uptick in two-parent families among the poor turned out to be due mainly to an increase in cohabitation. The much-ballyhooed dip in working mothers with children under the age of 1 left more than 50% of such mothers still in the workforce, a much larger figure than the 30% of such moms in paid labor in the 1970s. And 72% of mothers with children above the age of 1 were in the workforce in 2002, maintaining the 100-year high reached in the late 1990s (Gerson, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

For those still harboring any illusion that the historical transformation of marriage had come to an end, the rash of victories for proponents of same-sex marriage in 2003 and 2004 must have come as a major shock. In 2003, Canada legalized same-sex marriage. Then, on November 18, 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the state constitution guaranteed equal marriage rights for same-sex couples. Responding to an uproar of protest from his conservative base, President Bush declared in his State of the Union Address on January 20, 2004, that the nation must "defend the sanctity of marriage." This in turn spurred the newly elected mayor of San Francisco, Gavin Newsome, to express his indignation by directing the city to start issuing marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples on February 12. More than 3,200 couples, many of them from out of state, flocked to San Francisco to get married.

In response to the mounting controversy, President Bush endorsed a constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage. But this only incited more defiance. In New Mexico, New York, and Oregon, county clerks and commissioners also began issuing wedding licenses to gay and lesbian couples. As this issue goes to press, the controversy continues to rage.

Whatever people's feelings about same-sex marriage, everyone could see that gender norms and marriage behaviors had not stabilized after all. Commentators who had been happily predicting a return to traditional marriage immediately changed their tune. "The gays have

moved in to deliver the knockout punch” to marriage, claimed Phyllis Schlafly, who led the successful battle against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s (Nieves, 2003).

The fundamentalist Protestant minister James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, put it even more starkly: “The institution of marriage is on the ropes,” he wrote in September 2003, after the victories for same-sex marriage in Canada and the U.S. Supreme Court ruling overturning antisodomy laws. “Unless we act quickly, the family as it has been known for 5,000 years will be gone” (Dobson, 2003).

Now, it is not often that I agree with James Dobson about issues relating to marriage, and it is even more rare for me to accuse him of understatement. But the research I have been doing for my forthcoming history of marriage convinces me that Dobson is not only making an important point but also is actually underestimating just how momentous a change we are talking about.

In my view, marriage as we have known it for 5,000 years has *already* been overthrown. But it was heterosexuals, not gays and lesbians, who accomplished this revolution. The demand of gays and lesbians for legal recognition of their unions is a symptom, not the cause, of how much and how irreversibly marriage has changed.

THE REAL TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE

For thousands of years, marriage organized people’s places in the economic and political hierarchy of society. Whatever functions marriage served for the man and woman involved and for the children they produced, marriage was not primarily for their individual benefit. It was a way of raising capital, constructing political alliances, organizing the division of labor by age and gender, and deciding what claim, if any, children had on their parents, and what rights parents had in their children. Marriage served so many political, social, and economic functions that the individual needs and desires of its members (especially women and children, its subordinate members) were secondary considerations. In fact, for most people, whether rich or poor, marriage was as much about getting in-laws as about finding a mate and having a child.

For the propertied classes, marriage was the main way of consolidating wealth, transferring

property, laying claim to political power, even concluding peace treaties. When upper-class men and women married, dowry, bride wealth, or tribute changed hands, making the match a major economic investment by the parents and other kin of the couple. Even middle-class families had a huge economic stake in who married whom. Until the late 18th century, historian Margaret Hunt (1996) points out, marriage was “the main means of transferring property, occupational status, personal contacts, money, tools, livestock and women across generations and kin groups” (p. 151). For most men, the dowry that a wife brought was the biggest infusion of cash, goods, or land that they would ever acquire. For most women, finding a husband was the most important investment they could make in their economic future.

In the lower classes, marriage was also an economic and political transaction, but on a different scale. Instead of making an alliance with another domain to prevent war, the concerns of commoners were more immediate: “Do I marry someone with fields near my fields?” “Will my prospective mate meet the approval of the neighbors and relatives on whom I depend?” “Would these in-laws be a help to our family or a hindrance?” And because few farms or businesses could be run by a single person, the skills, resources, and tools prospective partners brought to the marriage were at least as important as their personality or attractiveness.

For all socioeconomic groups, marriage was the most important marker of adulthood and respectability. It was the primary way of organizing work along lines of age and gender. It was the main vehicle for redistributing resources to old and young—and also, contrary to contemporary romanticization of family life in the past, the main vehicle for extracting labor *from* the young.

For all of these reasons, love was considered a very poor reason to get married. It was desirable for love, or at least affection, to develop *after* marriage, and many parents allowed their children to veto a match with a partner who repelled them. But love was not the main thing that people took into account in deciding when and whom to marry. And when divorce occurred, it was more often to get a better set of in-laws or because of childlessness rather than because love had fled the home.

THE LOVE REVOLUTION

In the 17th century, a series of interrelated political, economic, and cultural changes began to erode the older functions of marriage and throw into question the right of parents, local elites, and government officials to limit individual autonomy in personal life, including marriage. And in the 18th century, the revolutionary new ideal of the love match triumphed in most of Western Europe and North America.

The marital ideals inaugurated in the 18th century represented a break with literally thousands of years of history. Suddenly, couples were supposed to invest more of their emotional energy in each other and their children than in their natal families, their kin, their friends, and their patrons. There was a new stress on marital companionship, intimacy, and privacy. The new ideal was a long way from the 20th century notion that men and women should be friends and lovers, but it was headed in that direction.

Contemporaries immediately recognized that this new idea threatened to radically destabilize personal life and gender relations. No sooner was the ideal of the love match and lifelong intimacy invented than people who took it seriously began to demand the right to divorce. The first demands to decriminalize homosexuality also came at the end of the 18th century, and they were raised by some of the most ardent defenders of the love match. Even in stable marriages, conservatives complained, the new values caused the couple "to be constantly taken up with each other" instead of carrying out their duties to society.

In other words, the very values that we have come to think of as traditional, the very values that invested marriage with such emotional weight in people's lives, had an inherent tendency to undermine the stability of marriage as an institution even as they increased the satisfactions of marriage as a relationship. I try to show in my forthcoming book that today's crisis of marriage was built in to the radical new marital values that so many people mistakenly believe are many thousands of years old. The same things that made marriage become such a unique and treasured personal relationship during the last 200 years paved the way for it to become an optional and fragile one.

For years, we have debated why the institution of lifelong marriage began to unravel in the 1970s. Liberals have blamed socioeconomic

forces. Conservatives have pointed to value changes. But I now believe that the real question is not why things fell apart in the 1970s, but why they did *not* fall apart in the 1790s. That is what I am currently attempting to figure out in my new book.

I do not believe that marriage will disappear. However, the trends that we are seeing, not just in Europe and North America, but all over the world, suggest that marriage will never regain its monopoly over the regulation of sex, the rearing of children, the transmission of resources from the older to the younger generation, or the organization of the division of labor by gender.

In legal terms, almost all Western nations, and even some non-Western ones, have experienced a blurring of the differences between the legal responsibilities and rights of married and unmarried individuals. Unmarried individuals who behave as if they are married have many of the same rights and are subject to many of the same obligations that used to depend on possession of a marriage license. Conversely, married people who wish to part are no longer held together by legal compulsion or economic necessity. It is more possible for individuals to live on their own than ever before in history.

Scholars of marriage and family life have many names to describe the breakdown of the wall separating marriage from nonmarriage. Andrew Cherlin (2004) talks about the *deinstitutionalization* of marriage in his contribution to this issue. Legal scholars refer to the *delegalization* of marriage. French sociologist Irene Thery (1994) calls the process "*demarriage*." I like historian Nancy Cott's (2000) suggestion that what has happened to marriage is akin to the historical disestablishment of religion. Once the state stopped conferring a whole set of special rights and privileges on one particular religious denomination, religion itself did not disappear, but many different churches and new religious groups proliferated. Similarly, once the state stopped insisting on a government-sanctioned marriage license for people to partake of the privileges and duties of parenthood or other long-term commitments, other forms of intimate relationships and childrearing arrangements proliferated, or came out from underground (Cott; Millar & Warman, 1996; Thery; Willekens, 2003).

Historians are generally reluctant to use the word revolution to describe changes in social

life, because such changes usually have very deep historical roots and almost always retain tremendous continuities with the past. We are especially skeptical when it comes to issues connected with family life, because ever since ancient Egypt and classical Rome, older generations have been bemoaning the loss of older family forms or marital values and predicting disaster for the next generation.

But in my current writing project, I have become convinced that we are indeed in the middle of a world-historic transformation of marriage and family life. Things are changing so fast that it is hard to tell which new relationships and interpersonal outcomes we observe are features of a new system and which are products of the transitional period we are going through. But one thing is for sure: There will be no turning back.

For better or worse, the relationship of marriage to larger social and economic institutions has been fundamentally changed, and so have individuals' own personal experiences of marriage or nonmarriage. Our research and practice must take this as a given. In the current historical context, the appropriate question for researchers and family practitioners is not what single family form or marriage arrangement we would prefer in the abstract, but how we can help people in a wide array of different committed relationships minimize their shortcomings and maximize their solidarities.

NOTE

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