

What if Marriage Is Bad for Us?

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Sometimes a belief becomes so strong that suggesting it might be wrong is nearly impossible. One such belief is that marriage is good for us. Last April, when Vermont finally recognized same-sex marriage, many of our fellow Vermonters rushed to celebrate. Neither one of us did. They were puzzled by our lack of enthusiasm. “You have to support gay marriage,” a straight colleague angrily shouted at one of us. But why do we have to celebrate any marriage? Unlike conservatives who attack gay marriage, it’s not the gay part we object to; it’s the marriage part. What does it even mean? Over the past 15 years, Americans have been fighting about that, and therefore about what it means to be a citizen and an adult.

In 1996, as Congress turned “welfare” into “workfare,” it proclaimed that “marriage is the foundation of a successful society.” A few years ago, President George W. Bush created the Healthy Marriage Initiative to promote marriage as a solution to poverty and for the well-being of children. Currently the government spends about \$150-million annually to promote marriage among our country’s poorest citizens. In *The Audacity of Hope*, President Obama claims that supporting marriage among low-income couples should be “something everyone can agree upon.” As one of his earliest acts as president, with two wars and an economic meltdown on his hands, Obama took time to approve taking \$5-million out of antipoverty funds to promote marriage for young people.

The belief that marriage is good for us also explains why gay and lesbian activists have been fighting so hard for same-sex marriage. According to Freedom to Marry, the national organization behind much of the gay-marriage movement, marriage is “the most powerful expression we have for the affirmation of love and commitment, a source of social recognition . . . that hold(s) two people together through life’s ups and downs.” Marriage is also the source of more than a thousand federal rights and responsibilities, not to mention cheaper gym memberships, social approval, and all those gifts that arrive on your wedding day.

Where there are policy disputes, you can expect social scientists to weigh in with their supposedly objective data. One noteworthy example is Mark Regnerus’s recent op-ed essay in *The Washington Post*, urging young people to get married. Regnerus argues that “today, as ever, marriage wisely entered into remains good for the economy and the community, good for one’s personal well-being, good for wealth creation, and, yes, good for the environment, too.”

Marriage promises to save the poor, empower gays and lesbians, and socialize the young. In support of those promises, the romantics wax about love and happiness, the pragmatics tout rights and security, and the experts crunch the numbers. But as critical sociologists, we find ourselves agreeing most strongly with Marx—Groucho—who quipped, “Marriage is a wonderful institution, but who wants to live in an institution?”

Institutions serve two purposes, practical and ideological. We will do well to keep both in mind in evaluating the benefits that marriage supposedly offers.

Marriage makes you rich. Advocates claim that marriage increases wealth. That makes sense; if the key to a successful marriage is hard work, you should at least get paid for it. It’s true that married people are wealthier than unmarried people, but it’s not marriage that makes you rich. Marriage is not randomly distributed across the population. People who get married (and stay married) tend to be wealthier and whiter than people who do not. For instance, 95 percent of white women will marry at some point in their lifetime, while only 43 percent of black women will.

To say marriage creates wealth is to confuse correlation with causation. If there is more wealth in Manhattan than in Brooklyn, that does not mean that moving to Manhattan will make you wealthier. In fact, moving — and marrying — may make you poorer, given the high start-up costs. A move requires first and last months’ rent, a moving van, and lots of bubble wrap. A marriage often demands a wedding, and with the average cost of weddings at \$30,000, getting married is going to cost you.

Nor will moving into marriage necessarily increase your earnings or earning potential. If you’re poor and have little education, saying “I do” won’t get you off welfare or make minimum wage any less a dead end. If you already have means, marriage might help. Be careful, though, because even when marriage does produce wealth, divorce often destroys it. If you are getting married for the economic benefits, better make sure it’s forever.

Marriage is traditional. As Frank Sinatra once crooned: “Love and marriage / go together like a horse and carriage / . . . It’s an institute you can’t disparage / Ask the local gentry and they will say it’s elementary.” But there is nothing

elementary about the form of marriage as we practice it today. Despite the claims of sociologists, politicians, and marriage advocates on all sides, marriage has changed over time and exists differently in different cultures.

Marriage as we imagine it today developed during the late 1800s, when it became “for love” and “companionate.” Until that point, one married for material and social reasons, not romance. Women required marriage for survival; men did not. That left men free to behave as they wished: Prostitutes and buggery were part of many a married man’s sexual repertoire. But then the Victorians (with their sexual prudishness) and first-wave feminists (with their sense that what’s good for the goose is good for the gander) insisted that antiprostitution and antisodomy laws be enacted, and that married men confine their sexual impulses to the conjugal bed. The result was enforced lifelong sexual monogamy for both parties, at least in theory.

That might have seemed reasonable in 1900, when the average marriage lasted about 11 years, a consequence of high death rates. But these days, when a marriage can drag on for half a century, it can be a lot of work. Laura Kipnis calls marriage a “domestic gulag,” a forced-labor camp where the inmates have to spend all their time outside of work working on their marriage.

And if the dyadic couple locked in lifelong monogamy was a radical new form, so was the family structure it spawned. The nuclear family is primarily a mutant product of the nuclear age. Before World War II, most Americans lived among extended family. The definition of family was not the couple and their offspring, but brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents as well. With the creation of suburbs for the middle classes, large numbers of white Americans began participating in the radical family formation of two married parents plus children in a detached house separated from extended family.

Although the nuclear family is idealized as “natural” and “normal” by our culture (Leave It to Beaver) and our government (“family values”), it has always been both a shockingly new way of living and a minority lifestyle. Even at its height, in the early 1970s, only about 40 percent of American families lived that way. Today that number is about 23 percent, including stepfamilies. The nuclear family is not only revolutionary; it is a revolution that has failed for most of us.

Marriage makes you healthy. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, married people have better health than those who are not married. A closer look at the data, however, reveals that married and never-married Americans are similar; it’s the divorced who seem to suffer. The lesson might be to never divorce, but an even more obvious lesson to be drawn from the research might be to never marry.

Naomi Gerstel and Natalia Sarkisian’s research shows that married couples are more isolated than their single counterparts. That is not a function just of their having children. Even empty-nesters and couples without children tend to have weak friendship networks. Marriage results in fewer rather than more social ties because it promises complete fulfillment through the claims of romance. We are instructed by movies, pop songs, state policy, and sociology to get married because “love is all you need.” But actually we humans need more. We need both a sense of connection to larger networks—to community, to place—and a sense of purpose that is beyond our primary sexual relationships.

For those reasons, marriage has been self-destructing as a social form. The marriage rate in the United States is at an all-time low. In 1960 about two-thirds of adult Americans were married. Today only slightly more than half of Americans live in wedded bliss. Actually, even the bliss is declining, with fewer married Americans describing their unions as “very happy.”

Maybe it’s the decline in happiness that has caused an increasing number of Americans to say “I don’t,” despite Hollywood’s presenting us with happy ending after happy ending and a government bent on distributing civil rights on the basis of marital status. Apparently no amount of propaganda or coercion can force humans to participate in a family form so out of sync with what we actually need.

With all that marriage supporters promise — wealth, health, stability, happiness, sustainability — our country finds itself confronted with a paradox: Those who would appear to gain the most from marriage are the same ones who prove most resistant to its charms. Study after study has found that it is the poor in the United States who are least likely to wed. The people who get married are the same ones who already benefit most from all our social institutions: the “haves.” They benefit even more when they convince everyone that the benefits are evenly distributed.

Too often we are presented with the false choice between a lifelong, loving marriage and a lonely, unmarried life. But those are far from the only options. We should consider the way people actually live: serial monogamy, polyamory, even polygamy.

Instead of “blaming the victims” for failing to adopt the formative lifestyles of the white and middle class, we should consider that those avoiding marriage might know exactly what they are doing. Marriage is not necessarily good for all of us, and it might even be bad for most of us. When there is broad, seemingly unanimous support for an institution, and when the institution is propped up by such disparate ideas as love, civil rights, and wealth creation, we

should wonder why so many different players seem to agree so strongly. Perhaps it's because they are supporting not just marriage but also the status quo.

We can dress up marriage in as many beautiful white wedding gowns as we like, but the fundamental fact remains: Marriage is a structure of rights and privileges for those who least need them and a culture of prestige for those who already have the highest levels of racial, economic, and educational capital.

So when you hear activists and advocates—gay, Christian, and otherwise—pushing to increase not only marriage rights but also marriage rates, remember these grouchy words of Marx: “Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedies.” Marriage is trouble. Americans haven't failed at marriage. Marriage has failed us.

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