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A Marriage Debate Worth Watching

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The folks over at the libertarian-leaning [CATO Institute](#) have produced a debate over marriage that demands attention. The lead essay by Stephanie Coontz sets the stage for the debate, and three substantial responses to her essay add further substance to the discussion. Given the fact that so much controversy over the marriage issues involves so little intellectual substance, we should welcome and give attention to this debate.

Stephanie Coontz is herself no stranger to this controversy. Her 1992 book *The Way We Never Were* represents a now-classic attempt to relativize the family and marriage debate, as Coontz argued that most of the concern about marriage in recent decades has been rooted in nostalgia, not reality. In her view, there is no fixed definition for marriage or family, and efforts to make any arrangement normative are doomed to failure.

In her [CATO Unbound](#) essay, “[The Future of Marriage](#),” Coontz traces her argument that, over the past two centuries, marriage has been transformed from an institution of social regulation to a personal relationship. In her words:

Today, when a marriage works, it delivers more benefits to its members — adults and children — than ever before. A good marriage is fairer and more fulfilling for both men and women than couples of the past could ever have imagined. Domestic violence and sexual coercion have fallen sharply. More couples share decision-making and housework than ever before. Parents devote unprecedented time and resources to their children. And men in stable marriages are far less likely to cheat on their wives than in the past.

But the same things that have made so many modern marriages more intimate, fair, and protective have simultaneously made marriage itself more optional and more contingent on successful negotiation. They have also made marriage seem less bearable when it doesn't live up to its potential. The forces that have strengthened marriage as a personal relationship between freely-consenting adults have weakened marriage as a regulatory social institution.

Coontz sees this as both inevitable, given shifts in the larger culture, and positive. Furthermore, she sees this revolution as both irreversible and expanding:

Still, there is no chance that we can restore marriage to its former supremacy in coordinating social and interpersonal relationships. Even as the divorce rate has dropped, the incidence of cohabitation, delayed marriage and non-marriage has risen steadily. With half of all Americans aged 25-29 unmarried, marriage no longer organizes the transition into regular sexual activity or long-term partnerships the way it used to. Although teen births are lower than a decade ago, births to unwed mothers aged 25 and older continue to climb. Almost 40 percent of America's children are born to unmarried parents. And gay and lesbian families are permanently out of the closet.

Coontz's theory of a permanent revolution is a nightmare for those who believe that marriage is needed as an institution of social regulation. She is a veteran of these debates and understands this clearly. As she argues, a host of social changes now represents “a recipe for a world where the social weight of marriage has been fundamentally and irreversibly reduced.”

She goes on to argue that efforts by social conservatives to recover an objective understanding of marriage are doomed

to failure. In particular, she argues against any call to recover traditional gender roles and the limitation of sex to marriage.

Her conclusion is telling:

The right research and policy question today is not “what kind of family do we wish people lived in?” Instead, we must ask “what do we know about how to help every family build on its strengths, minimize its weaknesses, and raise children more successfully?” Much recent hysteria to the contrary, we know a lot about how to do that. We should devote more of our energies to getting that research out and less to fantasizing about a return to a mythical Golden Age of marriage of the past.

Her call to help “every family” is offered without any definition of what a family is, and her warning against “fantasizing about a return to a mythical Golden Age of marriage of the past,” summarizes her view.

Responding to Coontz, Kay S. Hymowitz asserts that Coontz’s analysis of marriage misses one huge point — that marriage is an established and stable institution of social regulation among those who are economically advantaged. Among those with low incomes, marriage is in a free fall. Hymowitz describes this as “a yawning class divide” on marriage.

As she explains in “[The Marriage Gap](#):”

The large majority of individuals who are divorced or who are never-married parents are low-income and lacking a college, and in many cases a high school, degree. The large majority of middle-class men and women, on the other hand, marry before having children and stay married while raising them. When she assures us that marriage is not on the verge of extinction, she’s right – if you’re white and went to college.

As Hymowitz understands, the issue of central concern to society with regard to marriage has often been children — even more than the adults:

Yes, marriage has had other social purposes. Depending on the culture, it provided companionship, it organized kinship groups, it regulated inheritance of property; as reproduction-is-basic-to-marriage skeptics often observe, many cultures have allowed older women, generally widows, to marry if they had enough wealth to attract a suitor. (Less liberal cultures declared them useless and had them burn themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres.) Yet there were many other conceivable ways to regulate property or provide companionship; it was the inevitability of children in a sexual union that made marriage the universal human institution that it became.

In “[Against Family Fatalism](#),” Norval D. Glenn of the University of Texas puts the issue back to Coontz — but with a twist:

The fatalistic position concerning family change that Coontz apparently still embraces is a curious one for liberals to take, because they do not take it in regard to most other kinds of change that can be attributed ultimately to such master trends as industrialization, urbanization, and economic development. Take the case of climate change and environmental degradation — changes attributable ultimately to the same major influences that led to recent family changes. Some commentators do say that those changes are part and parcel of economic development and should be adapted to rather than resisted, but I know of no liberals who take that position. While acknowledging that there is no pre-industrial environmental Golden Age to which we can return, liberals generally believe that some of the negative environmental trends ensuing from economic growth can be and should be slowed, stopped, or reversed. A reasonable question is why liberals don’t consistently take a similar stance in regard to family change.

Finally, economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers reduce the issue to an economic reading. Thus they conclude their essay, “[Marriage and the Market](#),” with these words:

Trends in marital behavior reflect a common-sense response to the economic and social circumstances surrounding us. Just as we have deregulated the economy so that firms and businesses can deal with changing conditions, the long-run trend in U.S. family policy has been to deregulate the marriage market, and the book of rules governing who can get married or divorced where and when has become much thinner. Yet much of the current political debate is precisely about re-regulating marriage. Our concern is that this re-regulation may actually be a force undermining the dynamic

institution that is the modern U.S. family.

In other words, the economists side with Stephanie Coontz in arguing against a normative definition of marriage or the family and suggest a “deregulation” of “the marriage market.”

Their essay demonstrates the cost of reducing issues of this importance to a merely economic analysis, even as the essays taken together demonstrate the inevitable collision between conservative and libertarian worldviews.

Rarely are such substantial essays found in such an accessible form. This controversy will not disappear — the stakes are just too high. These essays represent a debate worth watching.

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