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The Divorce Divide — A National Embarrassment

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There are few national tragedies that can match the devastating effect of the Divorce Revolution. Four decades after California launched the revolution, the impact of divorce and the break-up of marriages and families is now well documented, coast to coast.

The availability of divorce without cause, so-called “no-fault” divorce, rendered every marriage less than it was before. Once impermanence became a mark of marriage in the law and in the culture, couples were required to muster a special level of marital commitment to remain married. Right before the nation’s eyes, divorce redefined marriage.



The revolution was, as is so often the case, led by members of the cultural, academic, legal, and political elites. Liberal intellectuals made the case for divorce as liberation, subverting marriage as a repressive institution. The moral revolutionaries attacked marriage as sexually limiting and oppressive. Feminists demanded divorce as a means of escaping marriage and achieving a right of exit for wives. There were even liberal religious leaders willing to offer a benediction over the dismantlement of marriage.

But as University of Virginia sociologist [W. Bradford Wilcox](#) recounts, it was none other than Ronald Reagan, then governor of California, who signed the nation’s first no-fault divorce bill. Reagan, who had recently experienced a bitter divorce from actress Jane Wyman, saw the legislation as a way to humanize divorce. Reagan later saw his role as, in Wilcox’s words, “one of the biggest mistakes of his political life.” Nevertheless, the damage was done — with effects far beyond California. As Wilcox explains, the availability of no-fault divorce “gutted marriage of its legal power to bind husband to wife, allowing one spouse to dissolve marriage for any reason — or for no reason at all.”

Professor Wilcox is one of the nation’s most knowledgeable authorities on the effects of divorce. He is director of the [National Marriage Project](#) at the University of Virginia and a senior fellow at the [Institute for American Values](#). In “[The Evolution of Divorce](#),” published in the inaugural issue of the journal [National Affairs](#), Wilcox traces the effect of the revolution:

This legal transformation was only one of the more visible signs of the divorce revolution then sweeping the United States: From 1960 to 1980, the divorce rate more than doubled — from 9.2 divorces per 1,000 married women to 22.6 divorces per 1,000 married women. This meant that while less than 20% of couples who married in 1950 ended up divorced, about 50% of couples who married in 1970 did. And approximately half of the children born to married parents in the 1970s saw their parents part, compared to only about 11% of those born in the 1950s.

Every revolution requires cultural preparation, and the Divorce Revolution is no exception. Wilcox helpfully traces three developments that fostered the acceptance of no-fault divorce. First came the sexual revolution. An age of sexual obsession not only celebrated sex outside of marriage; it also elevated sex as, in effect, the only motivation for a relationship. Second, the “anti-institutional tenor of the age” undermined the authority of the churches to oppose divorce. Third, the psychological revolution undermined marriage with its “focus on individual fulfillment and personal growth.” Of these three factors, the last was most central.

Wilcox's article covers a wide range of issues related to the evolution and effects of divorce, but one section of his article deserves particular attention. Early in his analysis he cites the complicity of the elites in bringing about the revolution of no-fault divorce. Yet, the elites never felt the impact of divorce in the same way that the poor and less educated did. As he explains, "This imbalance leaves our cultural and political elites less well attuned to the magnitude of social dysfunction in much of American society, and leaves the most vulnerable Americans — especially children living in poor and working-class communities — even worse off than they would otherwise be."

Later, Wilcox returns to this imbalance, documenting the "divorce divide" that marks American society. Among more educated and wealthier Americans, divorce is now more rare than it was in 1980. These privileged Americans have seen the impact of divorce and have more to lose if a marriage dissolves. They are now more likely than their parents' generation to remain married. It is surely good news that "a clear majority of children who are now born to married couples will grow up with their married mothers and fathers."

Furthermore, elite opinion among the academics has also shifted significantly on divorce. As Wilcox reports:

Although certainly not all scholars, therapists, policymakers, and journalists would agree that contemporary levels of divorce and family breakdown are cause for worry, a much larger share of them expresses concern about the health of marriage in America — and about America's high level of divorce — than did so in the 1970s. These views seep into the popular consciousness and influence behavior — just as they did in the 1960s and '70s, when academic and professional experts carried the banner of the divorce revolution.

So far, so good. But this is not the end of the story. Hauntingly, Wilcox observes that "marriage is increasingly the preserve of the highly educated and the middle and upper classes." Further:

When it comes to divorce and marriage, America is increasingly divided along class and educational lines. Even as divorce in general has declined since the 1970s, what sociologist Steven Martin calls a "divorce divide" has also been growing between those with college degrees and those without (a distinction that also often translates to differences in income). The figures are quite striking: College-educated Americans have seen their divorce rates drop by about 30% since the early 1980s, whereas Americans without college degrees have seen their divorce rates increase by about 6%. Just under a quarter of college-educated couples who married in the early 1970s divorced in their first ten years of marriage, compared to 34% of their less-educated peers. Twenty years later, only 17% of college-educated couples who married in the early 1990s divorced in their first ten years of marriage; 36% of less-educated couples who married in the early 1990s, however, divorced sometime in their first decade of marriage.

This "divorce divide" compounds the scandal of divorce, adding yet another level of moral responsibility to the issue and even greater culpability to the culture at large. The subversion of marriage flowed from the elites to the larger society. As Wilcox observes, working class and poor Americans once held more conservative views of marriage and divorce than the elites. No longer.

Now, the effects of the Divorce Revolution fall disproportionately on the poor. Even as the elites recover a significant level of commitment to marriage (and to being and remaining married in order to raise children), the effects of the revolution now fall on the poor, the less educated, and the less powerful. Even more tragically, the tragedy of divorce and the subversion of marriage fall on their children.

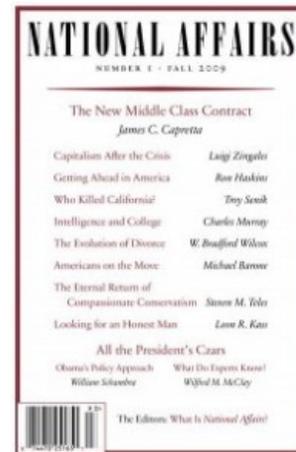
The Divorce Revolution is a national tragedy with enduring pernicious effects. Now we can see more clearly that the "divorce divide" is nothing less than scandal added to tragedy.

What Bradford Wilcox calls "the fallout of America's retreat from marriage" now disproportionately harms the least among us. Shame on us all.

I am always glad to hear from readers and listeners. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Professor Bradford Wilcox was my special guest on Tuesday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*. Listen [here](#).

National Affairs is an important new journal of ideas. As editor Yuval Levin explains, “To think a little more clearly means first of all to be better informed, and *National Affairs* will publish essays that bring to bear hard facts and figures and employ the social sciences, even as we remain aware of their limitations. It also means thinking more deeply, and we will publish essays that look to the philosophical foundations of our public life. And it means thinking constructively, so that we will publish not only diagnoses but, when possible, proposals for plausible remedies.” I welcome this new journal and recommend that you take a closer look.



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