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# One marriage under god

**For better or worse: Marriage promotion, cohabitation and American politics**

BY MADELEINE SCHWARTZ



Rose Sharpe makes wedding bouquets. (AP/Julie Jacobson)

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Marriage, by the numbers: In 2002, the Bush administration diverted over \$100 million dollars from existing welfare programs to create the Healthy Marriage Initiative, a national program to disseminate the importance of matrimony. Displaced funds included \$14 million from child welfare, \$6.1 million from a child support enforcement program, \$9 million worth of support for refugees, and \$40 million from a development strategies program focusing on Native Americans. Three years later, the US government sanctioned up to \$150 million more per year to support “healthy marriage and responsible programs.” A change of political parties has not tempered the

flow: in the last fiscal year, Congress approved \$75 million in spending on marriage promotion activities and \$75 million for responsible fatherhood initiatives. This, of course, does not include the cost of marriage to individuals themselves (the average American wedding costs over \$27,000, according to Reuters). That’s a lot to spend on an institution with a known failure rate of about 50 percent.



LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

Today, Americans are getting married less and less; the numbers of unmarried couples and single parents have risen. And yet, marriage — idealized, perfected marriage, marriage “worth fighting for” — has never had such a strong hold on our political imagination. However much the practice may be waning on the ground,

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the concept of marriage has found a revived energy in the rhetoric of policy-makers and pundits on both the Right and the Left. Cultural conservatives rally around preserving a nostalgic image of the nuclear family, those good old days when a man could walk through the door to a pot roast and a set of smiling faces. Meanwhile, the most exciting political announcement of the last year for Democrats was President Obama's concession that gay men and women, too, might one day get married. The more insistently Americans seem to be leaving the institution behind, the stronger its purchase on our language and public policy goals. Why? Two books help illustrate the persistence of these ideals.

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In Oklahoma, 32 percent of adults are divorced, 10 points higher than the national average. In 2000, the state has diverted 10 percent of its welfare money (a total of \$10 million) to finance a statewide marriage initiative. The program's listed goals would be to reduce the high number of divorces in Oklahoma by one-third, teach citizens about the benefits of marriage, and encourage cohabiting Oklahoma couples to marry. For Governor Frank Keating, who put the initiative into place, the program's possibilities didn't stop there. "The marriage initiative," he wrote, would, "make our state rich. That simple." To strengthen marriage, he contended, would be to create a stronger and more stable economic base for the family unit, and by extension, for the state itself.

As the sociologist Melanie Heath shows in her fine-tuned "[One Marriage Under God: The Campaign to Promote Marriage in America](#)," Oklahoma's program takes several forms. At the core of the program is Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), a workshop given free of charge over the course of a few weeks to Oklahomans looking to improve their relationships. The audience for these courses is mostly heterosexual, white, and middle class. But the program's variants proliferate across the state. There's CPREP, a Christian version; Prison PREP, taught to inmates; Employee Relationship Enhancement (ERE), for Native American reservations; another for high school students; and a special course taught to welfare recipients, compulsory in exchange for aide but not, according to its supporters, "required" (more on that later).

Central to the PREP is the concept of the "marriage cure," which holds that marriage is the solution to poverty. As Heath explains, the 1990s saw a growth of a "neo-family values" movement that used the language of political science and statistics to push the importance of matrimony as a solution to poverty. Research on the links between matrimony and economics, child welfare, and education began to emerge from secular research branches like the National Marriage Project, housed at the University of Virginia and the Institute for American Values. Marriage, according to one such report, "is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike." Never mind that the basic questions of correlation and causation remain totally unquestioned; such research confidently presents marriage as a panacea for all social ills: "Married people" — for whatever reason — "are happier, healthier, and better off financially."

Heath follows the Oklahoman PREP classes over the course of almost a year, and one of the book's strengths is allowing us to see what this kind of pro-marriage rhetoric looks like up close. The homophobia she encounters is staggering. There are, of course, the hyperbolic displays of hatred that have made pro-marriage foundations infamous: people standing outside the White House with shirts that say, "God Made Adam and Eve, Not Adam and Steve" and politicians who claim of gay rights, "There is no civil right to deny children a mother or a father." But the prejudice is just as often latent and insidious. When a lesbian couple participates in one of the workshops, Heath interviews the other participants about them. The comments are withering. One man, unprompted, recounts having knocked a gay schoolmate unconscious. Another woman states that she was made uncomfortable by the couple, but still concedes that "they are human. They have needs too." It's not surprising that one woman in the lesbian couple

says that although she realized in her 20s “who and what I was,” she stayed married to a man for 19 and a half years by “trying to be the best person I knew how to be.” Nineteen and a half years! This is as strong case as any for the reality of what Adrienne Rich described as “compulsory heterosexuality.”

As Heath surveys the administration of the much vaunted “marriage cure” in practice, it’s not hard to figure out what the real disease is. Again and again, the PREP classes stress the importance of traditional markers of gender: as Heath puts it, “men play with toys, women want flowers.” One workshop leader reads out statements about what women need, “All women (guys put on your tape recorder) want to feel like a princess. If you make her feel like a princess, she will make you feel like a king, if you get my drift.” Another recounts how his wife asked what she could do to get him to take out the garbage. His reply, “Pinch my butt and tell me how cute I am. Love them into change!” — as if to say, it’s simply not going to happen. “Back in your place, ladies!” these workshops might as well announce. In case the message wasn’t clear, one workshop Heath attends adds a reading of Ephesians 5:22-24: “Wives submit to your husband as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, of which he is the Savior.”

John Gray, the pop psychologist who wrote “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus,” now spends his time rallying at national pro-marriage conferences where he says things like:

We [men] just want [to be] our little master-of-my-own-kingdom. OK, I’m following everybody’s orders at work, they want me to talk a certain amount, I’ll do that [...] Give me one place where I’m king, just give me one moment, and that’s what a man needs sometimes.

This speech is called “The Mars/Venus Solution.”

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These battles may seem to be only about reinforcing gender roles and prohibiting homosexuality, but that there’s a class agenda inherent to marriage promotion as well, as the historian Elizabeth Pleck’s “Not Just Roommates: Cohabitation after the Sexual Revolution” demonstrates. Pleck surveys the fight for cohabitation rights in a variety of case studies, including the controversy over cohabitation at Barnard in the 1960s and a cohabitation scandal in a small Wisconsin town that drove one of its participants to suicide. What emerges from Pleck’s research is this: the history of the pro-marriage movement is a history of prejudice against the poor. Marriage promotion seeks to counteract living arrangements historically prevalent among the poor, and, as those phenomena spread, punish the most vulnerable for social changes outside of their control.

Cohabitation, Pleck explains, has, since the 1960s, often been considered a white phenomenon — when we think of it, we tend to think of hippie communes and college students trying out domestic partnership. Yet in reality, she writes, cohabitation has always been more widespread among interracial and minority couples than it is among the white middle class. “[Cohabitation] has often been considered poor people’s marriage,” Pleck writes, “because it is more flexible than formal matrimony, separating a couple’s co-residence from considerations of support and division of property.” Today, children in upper class households (more than \$89,122 a year) are twice as likely to have married parents than children whose parents earn a combined \$41,940, according to *The New York Times*. (Who else can afford a \$27,000 wedding?)

The legal importance of cohabitation first came under public scrutiny when interracial couples began taking up the practice out of necessity: not allowed to marry, they had had no choice but to live together illegally. In 1962, Connie Hoffman (a white woman) and Dewey McLaughlin (a Honduran man) were sentenced to 30 days in jail and a fine of

\$150 each for living together in the same apartment. The Supreme Court subsequently outlawed discrimination against interracial cohabitation, and Hoffman and McLaughlin won the right to live together. But Florida never fully decriminalized cohabitation; it is one of five states where the practice is still illegal. Cohabitation, however prevalent, was left as a legal loophole through which discrimination against interracial couples was, and is, still possible.

It was around this time that Assistant Secretary of Labor and future US Senator Daniel Moynihan published his now infamous report describing the “tangle of pathology” of single mothers and divorce in black families as a leading source of racial inequality in the states. Moynihan compared the “stable” white family to the unstable “family structure of lower class Negroes” which, he argued, was “approaching a complete breakdown.” “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family,” Moynihan’s report (which, curiously, is not mentioned in Pleck’s book) claimed. Racial inequality was not a product of outside factors; rather, it, and the progress of minority groups in general, started at home. Moynihan’s inflated language on the dangers of the family were quickly integrated within a mainstream argument about the importance of “family structure” to social success.

While its overt racial dimension was later dropped, this version of the pro-family argument soon became central to the liberal concern for America’s social fitness. By the time of Jimmy Carter’s presidency, the dissolution of the nuclear family structure had spread beyond minority groups. The divorce rate had doubled and the number of households headed by a single woman had increased by one third. Black households weren’t the only households not to look like the traditional, stable “white family”; white families didn’t look like white families either. Alarmed by these changes, Carter drew together the first White House Conference on Families. (A personal believer in the importance of a traditional family structure, Carter told his own employees, “Those of you who are living in sin, I hope you’ll get married.”)

Carter’s conference, according to Pleck, was politically divisive: conservatives wanted a strict traditional definition of family structure, while feminists and gay rights activists advocated something looser. The focus of the conference was changed from “the Family” to “Families”; even Carter seemed unclear as to which family structures to condemn and which to accept. The makeup of the conference itself reflected this confusion: at its inception, its director was an African-American single mother; by the end of the planning, she had been replaced by a married Catholic man. But while the definition of the family itself was never set in stone, the need and desire for a policy built around the idea of “the family” had become integrated within the political mainstream. “Families,” Carter announced, “are both the foundation of American society and its most important institution.” The imprecise, but resonant, notion of “family structure” had become central to the way in which America approached its social inequalities.

In Pleck’s case studies, marriage promotion laws come across as a means of getting the upper hand on the poor, a way of punishing vulnerable people for the social changes that were happening all around them. Among the widespread backlash against the sexual revolution, prioritizing marriage offered a quick and reliable means of penalizing deviant behavior. To take one example: throughout the 1960s, women on welfare, because of their dependence on the state, were intensely scrutinized for their potential cohabitation. Fraud investigators would park outside a woman’s apartment, taking notes on who entered and exited. “A man carrying a bag of groceries into a house,” Pleck writes, “was sufficient proof of cohabitation.” Surveillance and policing from outside was not enough: state funds gave the government the right to invade the privacy of a home. During “Operation Bed Check,” an Oakland raid in January of 1963, inspectors entered hundreds of homes at midnight to determine whether a man was inside. This overtly paternalistic program vividly illustrates how the dissolution of these private hierarchies had been transformed into a matter of public concern. One can easily imagine the fraud investigator in charge of “Operation Bed Check” coming up with the name as he walked away frustrated after searching his daughter’s bed for a potential

lover.

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Such discrimination remains, in only slightly less hyperbolic variations, today. Our current welfare system, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), lists marriage promotion as one of its explicit goals. States routinely discriminate against the single or the nonmarried; funds are allotted in order to encourage couples to marry, however unwillingly. “One area of greatest success for the backlash against the sexual revolution,” Pleck writes, “was welfare policy, where prejudices about sexuality, marriage, and race were joined with taxpayer desires to cut the welfare rolls.”

More generally, cohabiters form a second tier of citizens. They can be legally barred from access to housing. They pay higher insurance and tax rates. One damning statistic uncovered by Pleck, hidden in the footnotes, is that “[c]ohabitors, same or opposite sex, are two or three times more likely not to have health insurance compared to married couples.” Our marital policies are clearly not making us “healthier and happier,” by any standard.

Back to that money spent in Oklahoma. It may seem surprising that the money spent on marriage promotion is specifically welfare money, especially as Oklahoma provides comparatively little financial aid to begin with. And yet the use of such funds for marriage promotion, however striking, is hardly an anomaly. It fits within the history of marriage promotion as a means to value those who need help. In the case of the Oklahoma program in particular, marriage promotion forms a double punishment for the poor, especially single mothers. Not only does it reduce the amount of welfare available, but it also promotes the idea that structural inequality is simply derived from moral failure. Emphasis on the superiority of marriage makes social policy out of discrimination and prejudice.

The last few years have seen a huge expansion in the definition of marriage and marriage rights. For the first time in history, marriage may no longer be defined as a contract “between a man and a woman.” This is an exciting development. But the politics of marriage are as much about class as they are about sexuality. Marriage is not, as prominent gay marriage supporter Andrew Sullivan says, only (or even primarily) an “institution of love.” It is also a social and economic institution. As marriage takes a stronger hold onto our political imagination, this cannot be forgotten. A fight for true marital equality cannot take the superiority of marriage to nonmarriage as its starting point. Otherwise, it is merely creating new impediments to the happiness of all.

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