

James Q. Wilson

Why We Don't Marry

The cultural trends that gave us enlightenment and freedom now give us cohabitation and divorce.

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Everyone knows that the rising proportion of women who bear and raise children out of wedlock has greatly weakened the American family system. This phenomenon, once thought limited to African Americans, now affects whites as well, so much so that the rate at which white children are born to an unmarried mother is now as high as the rate for black children in the mid-1960s, when Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued his famous report on the Negro family. For whites the rate is one-fifth; for blacks it is over one-half.

Almost everyone—a few retrograde scholars excepted—agrees that children in mother-only homes suffer harmful consequences: the best studies show that these youngsters are more likely than those in two-parent families to be suspended from school, have emotional problems, become delinquent, suffer from abuse, and take drugs. Some of these problems may arise from the economic circumstances of these one-parent families, but the best studies, such as those by Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, show that low income can explain, at most, about half of the differences between single-parent and two-parent families. The rest of the difference is explained by a mother living without a husband.

And even the income explanation is a bit misleading, because single moms, by virtue of being single, are more likely to be poor than are married moms. Now that our social security and pension systems have dramatically reduced poverty among the elderly, growing up with only one parent has dramatically increased poverty among children. In this country we have managed to shift poverty from old folks to young folks. Former Clinton advisor William Galston sums up the matter this way: you need only do three things in this country to avoid poverty—finish high school, marry before having a child, and marry after the age of 20. Only 8 percent of the families who do this are poor; 79 percent of those who fail to do this are poor.

This pattern of children being raised by single parents is now a leading feature of the social life of almost all English-speaking countries and some European ones. The illegitimacy ratio in the late 1990s was 33 percent for the United States, 31 percent for Canada, and 38 percent for the United Kingdom.

Now, not all children born out of wedlock are raised by a single mother. Some, especially in Sweden, are raised by a man and woman who, though living together, are not married; others are raised by a mother who gets married shortly after the birth. Nevertheless, there has been a sharp increase in children who are not only born out of wedlock but are raised without a father. In the United States, the percentage of children living with an unmarried mother has tripled since 1960 and more than doubled since 1970. In England, 22 percent of all children under the age of 16 are living with only one parent, a rate three times higher than in 1971.

Why has this happened? There are two possible explanations to consider: money and culture.

Money readily comes to mind. If a welfare system pays unmarried mothers enough to have their own apartment, some women will prefer babies to husbands. When government subsidizes something, we get more of it. But for many years, American scholars discounted this possibility. Since the amount of welfare paid per mother had declined in inflation-adjusted terms, and since the amount paid in each state showed no correlation with each state's illegitimacy rate, surely money could not have caused the increase in out-of-wedlock births.

This view dominated scholarly discussions until the 1990s. But there are three arguments against it. First, the inflation-adjusted value of welfare benefits was not the key factor. What counted was the inflation-adjusted value of *all* the benefits an unmarried mother might receive—not only welfare, but also food stamps, public housing, and Medicaid. By adding these in, welfare kept up with inflation.

Second, what counted was not how much money each state paid out, but how much it paid compared with the cost of living in that state. As Charles Murray pointed out, the benefits for a woman in New Orleans (\$654 a month) and those for one in San Francisco (\$867 a month) made nearly identical contributions to the cost of living, because in New Orleans it cost about two-thirds as much to live as it did in San Francisco.

Third, comparing single-parent families and average spending levels neglects the real issue: how attractive is welfare to a low-income unmarried woman in a given locality? When economist Mark Rosenzweig asked this question of women who are part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—a panel study of people that has been going on since 1979—he found that a 10 percent increase in welfare benefits made the chances that a poor young woman would have a baby out of wedlock before the age of 22 go up by 12 percent. And this was true for whites as well as blacks. Soon other scholars were confirming Rosenzweig's findings. Welfare made a difference.

But how big a difference? AFDC began in 1935, but by 1960 only 4 percent of the children getting welfare had a mother who had never been married; the rest had mothers who were widows or had been separated from their husbands. By 1996 that had changed dramatically: now approximately two-thirds of welfare children had an unmarried mom, and hardly any were the offspring of widows.

Why this change? At least for blacks, one well-known explanation has been offered: men did not marry because there were no jobs for them in the big cities. As manufacturing employment sharply declined in the central cities, William Julius Wilson has argued, blacks were unable to move to the suburbs as fast as the jobs. The unemployed males left behind are not very attractive as prospective husbands to the women they know, and so more and more black women do without marriage.

The argument has not withstood scholarly criticism. First, Mexican Americans, especially illegal immigrants, live in the central city also, but the absence of good jobs has not mattered, even though many Mexicans are poorer than blacks, speak English badly, and if

undocumented cannot get good jobs. Nevertheless, the rate of out-of-wedlock births is much lower among these immigrants than it is among African Americans, as W. J. Wilson acknowledges.

Second, Christopher Jencks has shown that there has been as sharp a decline in marriage among employed black men as among unemployed ones, and that the supply of employed blacks is large enough to provide husbands for almost all unmarried black mothers. For these people, as Jencks concludes, “marriage must . . . have been losing its charms for non-economic reasons.”

Moreover, the argument that single-parent families have increased because black men have not been able to move to wherever factory jobs can be found does not explain why such families have grown so rapidly among whites, for whom moving around a city should be no problem. For these whites—and I suspect for many blacks as well—there must be another explanation.

To explain the staggering increase in unmarried mothers, we must turn to culture. In this context, what I mean by culture is simply that being an unmarried mother and living on welfare has lost its stigma. At one time living on the dole was shameful; now it is much less so. As this may not be obvious to some people, let me add some facts that will support it.

Women in rural communities who go on welfare leave it much sooner than the same kind of women who take welfare in big cities, and this is true for both whites and blacks and regardless of the size of their families. The studies that show this outcome offer a simple explanation for it. In a small town, everyone knows who is on welfare, and welfare recipients do not have many friends in the same situation with whom they can associate. But in a big city, welfare recipients are not known to everyone, and each one can easily associate with other women living the same way. In the small town, welfare recipients tell interviewers the same story: “I always felt like I was being watched”; “they treat us like welfare cattle”; people “make nasty comments.” But in a big city, recipients had a different story: Everyone “is in the same boat I am”; people “don’t look down on you.”

American courts have made clear that welfare laws cannot be used to enforce stigma. When Alabama tried in 1960 to deny welfare to an unmarried woman who was living with a man who was not her husband, the U.S. Supreme Court objected. Immorality, it implied, was an outdated notion. The states have no right to limit welfare to a “worthy person,” and welfare belongs to the child, not the mother. If the state is concerned about immorality, it will have to rehabilitate the women by other means.

How did stigma get weakened by practice and undercut by law, when Americans—no less than Brits, Canadians, and Australians—favor marriage and are skeptical of welfare?

Let me suggest that beneath the popular support for marriage there has slowly developed, almost unnoticed, a subversion of it, which can be summarized this way: whereas marriage was once thought to be about a social union, it is now about personal preferences. Formerly, law and opinion enforced the desirability of marriage without asking what went on in that union; today, law and opinion enforce the desirability of personal happiness without worrying

much about maintaining a formal relationship. Marriage was once a sacrament, then it became a contract, and now it is an arrangement. Once religion provided the sacrament, then the law enforced the contract, and now personal preferences define the arrangement.

The cultural change that made this happen was the same one that gave us science, technology, freedom, and capitalism: the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment—that extraordinary intellectual development that began in eighteenth-century England, Scotland, Holland, and Germany—made human reason the measure of all things, throwing off ancient rules if they fell short. What the king once ordered, what bishops once enforced, what tradition once required was to be set aside in the name of scientific knowledge and personal self-discovery. The Enlightenment's great spokesmen were David Hume, Adam Smith, and Immanuel Kant; its greatest accomplishment was the creation of the United States of America.

I am a great admirer of the Enlightenment. But it entailed costs. I take great pride in the vast expansion in human freedom that the Enlightenment conferred on so many people, but I also know that the Enlightenment spent little time worrying about those cultural habits that make freedom meaningful and constructive. The family was one of these.

It was in the world most affected by the Enlightenment that we find both its good and bad legacies. There we encounter both remarkable science and personal self-indulgence. There we find human freedom and high rates of crime. There we find democratic governments and frequent divorces. There we find regimes concerned about the poor and a proliferation of single-parent families.

Single-parent families are most common in those nations—England, America, Canada, Australia, France, the Netherlands—where the Enlightenment had its greatest effect. Such families are far less common in Italy, Spain, Eastern Europe, Russia, the Middle East, China, and Japan. It was in the enlightened nations that nuclear rather than extended families became common, that individual consent and not clan control was the basis of a marriage contract, and that divorce first became legal.

But why did the Enlightenment have its greatest effect on the English-speaking world and on northwestern Europe? I think it was because life in those countries had for so long been arranged in ways that provided fertile ground in which human reason and personal freedom could take root and prosper. Alan Macfarlane, the great English anthropologist, has shown that land in England was individually owned as far back as the thirteenth century and possibly even earlier. There, and in similar countries in northwestern Europe, land ownership had established the basis for a slow assertion of human rights and legal defenses. If you own the land, you have a right to keep, sell, or bequeath it, and you have access to courts that will defend those rights and, in defending them, will slowly add more rights.

Marriage depended on land. Until a young man inherited or bought a piece of property, he was in no position to take a wife. The rule was: no land, no marriage. As a result, English men and women married at a much older age than was true elsewhere. But with the rise of cities and the growth of industrialism, that began to change. Now a man and a woman, already defined by rights that were centuries old, could marry on an income, not on a farm, and so they married at a younger age.

English couples could get married on the basis of their individual consent, without obtaining the formal approval of their parents, though parents still might try to influence these decisions, and among the landed aristocracy such influence was often decisive. But for most people, the old rule of the Roman Catholic church was in force: no marriage was legitimate unless the man and woman freely consented. That rule found its widest observance in countries like England, where individual land ownership and personal rights reinforced it.

In Eastern Europe, to say nothing of the Middle and Far East, a different culture had been created out of a different system for owning land. In many parts of these regions, land lay in the control of families and clans. No individual owned it, and no individual could sell or bequeath it. One man might run the farm, but he did so not on the basis of ownership, but because of his seniority or skill, with the land itself remaining the property of an extended family.

In these places—where courts, unimportant in matters of real estate, tended to be unimportant in other respects as well—human rights were less likely to develop. In clan-based regimes, families often decided what man a woman might marry, and, since family labor worked family-owned land, men and women married at a young age, in hopes of adding many children to the common labor force.

The Enlightenment did not change the family immediately, because everyone took family life for granted. The most important Enlightenment thinkers assumed marriage and denounced divorce. That assumption—and in time that denunciation—slowly lost force, as people gradually experienced the widening of human freedom.

The laws, until well into the twentieth century, made it crystal clear that, though a child might be conceived by an unmarried couple, once born it had to have two parents. There was no provision for the state to pay for a single-parent child, and public opinion strongly and unanimously endorsed that policy.

But by the end of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, policies changed, and then, slowly, opinion changed. Two things precipitated the change: first, a compassionate desire to help needy children; and second, a determination to end the legal burdens under which women suffered. The first was a powerful force, especially since the aid to needy children was designed to help those who had lost their fathers owing to wars or accidents, as so many did as a consequence of the First World War and of industrial or mining accidents. Slowly, however, a needy child was redefined to include those of any mother without a husband, and not just any who had become a widow.

The emancipation of women was also a desirable process. In America and England, nineteenth-century women already had more rights than those in most of Europe, but when married they still could not easily own property, file for a divorce, or conduct their own affairs. By the 1920s most of these restrictions had ended, and once women got the vote, there was no chance of these limitations ever being reinstated.

We should therefore not be surprised that the twenties were an enthusiastic display of unchaperoned dating, provocative dress, and exhibitionist behavior. Had it not been for a

time-out imposed by the Great Depression and the Second World War, we would no longer be referring to the sixties as an era of self-indulgence; we would be talking about the legacy of the twenties.

The sixties reinstated trends begun half a century earlier, but now without effective opposition. No-fault divorce laws were passed throughout most of the West, the pill and liberalized abortion laws dramatically reduced the chances of unwanted pregnancies, and popular entertainment focused on pleasing the young.

As a result, family law, in Carl Schneider's term, lost its moral basis. It was easier to get out of a marriage than a mortgage. This change in culture was made crystal clear by court decisions. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Supreme Court referred to marriage as a "holy estate" and a "sacred obligation." By 1965 the same court described marriage as "an association of two individuals."

People still value marriage; but it is only that value—and very little social pressure or legal obligation—that sustains it.

But there is another part of the cultural argument, and it goes to the question of why African Americans have such high rates of mother-only families. When black scholars addressed this question, as did W. E. B. DuBois in 1908 and E. Franklin Frazier in 1939, they argued that slavery had weakened the black family. When Daniel Patrick Moynihan repeated this argument in 1965, he was denounced for "blaming the victim."

An intense scholarly effort to show that slavery did little harm to African-American families followed that denunciation; instead, what really hurt them was migrating to big cities where they encountered racism and oppression.

It was an astonishing argument. Slavery, a vast and cruel system of organized repression that, for over two centuries, denied to blacks the right to marry, vote, sue, own property, or take an oath; that withheld from them the proceeds of their own labor; that sold them and their children on the auction block; that exposed them to brutal and unjust punishment: all this misery had little or no effect on family life, but moving as free people to a big city did. To state the argument is to refute it.

But since some people take academic nonsense seriously, let me add that we now know, thanks to such scholars as Orlando Patterson, Steven Ruggles, and Brenda E. Stevenson, that this argument was empirically wrong. The scholars who made it committed some errors. In calculating what percentage of black mothers had husbands, they accepted many women's claims that they were widows, when we now know that such claims were often lies, designed to conceal that the respondents had never been married. In figuring out what proportion of slaves were married, these scholars focused on large plantations, where the chance of having a spouse was high, instead of on small ones, where most slaves lived, and where the chance of having a spouse was low. On these small farms, only about one-fifth of the slaves lived in a nuclear household.

After slavery ended, sharecropping took its place. For the family, this was often no great improvement. It meant that it was very difficult for a black man to own property and thus hard for him to provide for the progress of his children or bequeath to them a financial start in life. Being a tenant farmer also meant that he needed help on the land, and so he often had many children, despite the fact that, without owning the land, he could not provide for their future.

The legacy of this sad history is twofold. First, generations of slaves grew up without having a family, or without having one that had any social and cultural meaning. Second, black boys grew up aware that their fathers were often absent or were sexually active with other women, giving the boys poor role models for marriage. Today, studies show that the African-American boys most likely to find jobs are those who reject, rather than emulate, their fathers; whereas for white boys, those most likely to find work are those who admire their fathers.

What is astonishing today is that so many African Americans are married and lead happy and productive lives. This is an extraordinary accomplishment, of which everyone should be proud. But it is an accomplishment limited to only about half of all black families, and white families seem to be working hard to catch up.

But there remains at least one more puzzle to solve. Culture has shaped how we produce and raise children, but that culture surely had its greatest impact on how educated people think. Yet the problem of weak, single-parent families is greatest among the least educated people. Why should a culture that is so powerfully shaped by upper-middle-class beliefs have so profound an effect on poor people? If some intellectuals have devalued marriage, why should ordinary people do so? If white culture has weakened marriage, why should black culture follow suit?

I suspect that the answer may be found in Myron Magnet's book *The Dream and the Nightmare*. When the haves remake a culture, the people who pay the price are the have-nots. Let me restate his argument with my own metaphor. Imagine a game of crack-the-whip, in which a line of children, holding hands, starts running in a circle. The first few children have no problem keeping up, but near the end of the line the last few must run so fast that many fall down. Those children who did not begin the turning suffer most from the turn.

There are countless examples of our cultural crack-the-whip. Heroin and cocaine use started among elites and then spread down the social scale. When the elites wanted to stop, they could hire doctors and therapists; when the poor wanted to stop, they could not hire anybody. The elites endorsed community-based centers to treat mental illness, and so mental hospitals were closed down. The elites hired psychiatrists; the poor slept on the streets. People who practiced contraception endorsed loose sexuality in writing and movies; the poor practiced loose sexuality without contraception. Divorce is more common among the affluent than the poor. The latter, who can't afford divorce, deal with unhappy marriages by not getting married in the first place. My only trivial quarrel with Magnet is that I believe these changes began a century ago and even then built on more profound changes that date back centuries.

Now you probably expect me to tell you what we can do about this, but if you believe, as I do, in the power of culture, you will realize that there is very little one can do. As a University of Chicago professor once put it, if you succeed in explaining why something is so, you have

probably succeeded in explaining why it must be so. He implied what is in fact often the case: change is very hard.

The remarkable fact is that today so many Americans value marriage, get married, and want their children to marry. Many often cohabit, but when a child arrives most get married. The ones who don't make their children suffer. But to many people the future means more cohabitation—more “relationships”—and fewer marriages. Their goal is Sweden, where marriage is slowly going out of style.

The difficulty with cohabitation as opposed to marriage has been brilliantly laid out by Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher in their book *The Case for Marriage*. In it they show that married people, especially men, benefit greatly from marriage: they are healthier, live longer, and are less depressed. But many young men today have not absorbed that lesson. They act as if sex is more important than marriage, worry more about scoring than dating, and are rewarded by their buddies when they can make it with a lot of young women. To them, marriage is at best a long-term benefit, while sex is an immediate preoccupation. This fact supplies us with a sober lesson: the sexual revolution—one that began nearly a century ago but was greatly hastened by the 1960s—was supposed to help make men and women equal. Instead it has helped men, while leaving many women unmarried spectators watching *Sex and the City* on HBO.

One could imagine an effort to change our culture, but one must recognize that there are many aspects of it that no one, least of all I, wants to change. We do not want fewer freedoms or less democracy. Most of us, myself included, do not want to change any of the gains women have made in establishing their moral and legal standing as independent actors with all the rights that men once enjoyed alone. We can talk about tighter divorce laws, but it is not easy to design one that both protects people from ending a marriage too quickly with an easy divorce and at the same time makes divorce for a good cause readily available.

The right and best way for a culture to restore itself is for it to be rebuilt, not from the top down by government policies, but from the bottom up by personal decisions. On the side of that effort, we can find churches—or at least many of them—and the common experience of adults that the essence of marriage is not sex, or money, or even children: it is commitment.