A Young Radical’s View of Marriage

written by Amy Littlefield | June 2, 2011

A UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN STUDY[1] found that becoming a wife creates seven added hours of housework per week for women. For men, housework decreases by one hour per week after marriage. Another way to say this is that gender roles some like to claim are dead are in fact alive and well. The study took a "nationally representative" sample of couples (including, presumably, some who believed they were flouting the division of labor) and relied on time-diary data from 2005.

Beyond household chores, radicals have objected to marriage on multiple fronts and for obvious reasons. For Emma Goldman, the institution of marriage crippled women in the same way that capitalism crippled men: "It is like that other paternal arrangement —capitalism," she wrote in the essay "Marriage and Love," published in the 1917 collection *Anarchism and Other Essays*. Capitalism "robs man of his birthright, stunts his growth, poisons his body, keeps him in ignorance, in poverty and dependence, and then institutes charities that thrive on the last vestige of man's self-respect," she wrote. And marriage does the same to women, all under the guise of protecting them.

"The institution of marriage makes a parasite of woman, an absolute dependent," wrote Goldman. "It incapacitates her for life's struggle, annihilates her social consciousness, paralyzes her imagination, and then imposes its gracious protection, which is in reality a snare, a travesty on human character."

Engels wrote in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* that the monogamous family and its marriage ties, "based on the supremacy of the man," were created for the secure transfer of property rights — the "express purpose" of such ties was to "produce children of undisputed paternity; such paternity is demanded because these children are later to come into their father’s property." Both land and wealth were primarily exchanged through marriage as far back as there are writer records.[2]

For proof that the connection between marriage and property — and the notion of wives as property of men — is still alive, albeit in mutated form, we need look no further than pop artist Beyoncé’s recent hit "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" and its refrain: "If you liked it then you should have put a ring on it." Accompanied by sporty dance moves and intended as a ballad of female empowerment, the message is nonetheless a regressive one: that a man can stake a claim on a woman through marriage, if he has the financial capital to do so.

Feminists, certainly, have had their objections to marriage, not merely for the extra housework it creates. Marlene Dixon called the institution of marriage "the chief vehicle for the perpetuation of

the oppression of women."[3] Betty Freidan wrote in the feminist classic *The Feminine Mystique* that marriage stunted the mental growth of middle-class housewives. Simone de Beauvoir had no use for marriage, writing in the hallmark *The Second Sex* that "Marriage is obscene in principle insofar as it transforms into rights and duties those mutual relations which should be founded on a spontaneous urge."[4]

Then there is the fact that non-heterosexual couples cannot marry in the majority of places in the United States. While conservatives argue against same-sex marriage on the basis of "tradition," historians such as Nancy Cott have noted that change is the only true tradition in the history of marriage, which has fluctuated according to evolving views on race, sex, and religion. For Cott, the exclusion of same-sex couples conflicts with a historical trend toward gender equality in marriage.[5]

Among people who can and do marry, data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention show for every two couples who married, one got divorced in 2009.

In fact, marriage appears to be failing as a model for many families. According to an analysis of 2000 Census data by the group Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, only 22.4 percent of households included a married heterosexual couple with biological offspring. That group has used such data to reframe "family values," expand the conservative definition of "family" and promote policies that support all families.[6]

Marriage also appears to be more popular among whites, leading some writers, including Joy Jones in an infamous 2006 *Washington Post* piece, to suggest that "Marriage is for white people." A study of 2007 Census data showed 80 percent of white, non-Hispanic family groups and 82 percent of Asian family groups were married couples, while such couples composed only 45 percent of black family groups and 65 percent of Hispanic family groups. Black feminists have argued that economic inequalities rooted in racism and slavery are partly to blame for the gap. Add to that the fact that one in nine black men ages 20-34 are incarcerated (compared to 1 in 30 men overall in the same category) and the likelihood of black women finding partners of the same race decreases substantially.[7]

But that has not stopped critics from alternately blaming black men and black women for not marrying. The Wedded Bliss Foundation, for example, creator of the event Black Marriage Day, encourages marriage as a stabilizing force for the black community and a way to reduce single parenthood, telling black women — in language eerily similar to the what 1950s magazines told white, middle-class housewives — that "Marriage is the best environment for a woman to be all she can be."[8]

Marriage is a vehicle through which the state regulates which pairings are acceptable — as we saw with the historical criminalization of mixed-race marriages — and which people are fit to raise families — as we see with the modern attempts to ban gay marriage and prohibit gay families from adopting children. Throughout history, marriage has been used as a way for the state to regulate bodies and sexualities, determining which people are fit to marry, disenfranchising people of color, and punishing women from lower classes who did not or could not fit the mold of the acceptable wife. The criminalization of mixed-race marriage continues in a certain way, as the state regulates marriages between immigrants and residents, deciding which couples have the legitimate right to live together on U.S. soil. Marriage is one of the most personal and prevalent ways the state involves itself in the private lives of people.

So what possible good can marriage offer a young person with political convictions? Tax incentives, for a start. A chance at a ceremony paid for by other people and attended by loved ones

who support the union. An easy way to inform strangers of the status of one's heart. A cascade of domestic implements related to cooking, cleaning, and keeping house. But is that worth entering an institution that is imbued with sexism, racism, state control, and social privilege, and potentially taking on an extra seven hours a week of housework?

SUCH QUESTIONS WEIGH ON MY MIND as I reach the age where people I know are actually entering the "obscene" and crippling institution.

Years ago, when I first registered for the social media website Facebook, it was routine for people to virtually "marry" close friends by selecting a friend's name on the profile section dedicated to relationship status. By elevating close female friendships over any potential marriage bonds, my friends and I mocked the institution of marriage and played with gender norms, albeit in a superficial way. Despite being in a real-life, heterosexual partnership, I remain "engaged" to a college friend on Facebook, a status that has recently caused confusion among family and friends, who have begun to notice that I am now out of college and at the age when I might marry. This, I think, marks a significant milestone.

For me, the question of whether to marry is tied to the larger issue of how fully to embrace other institutional privileges. For example, I can afford to own a car, but does that necessarily mean I should buy one, and thus support environmental degradation and foreign wars fought for oil? For those of us who choose to live in civilization — and even, I would imagine, for those who live off-the-grid and use bicycles for transportation and rainwater for sustenance — these questions connect the personal to the political. How does one balance personal happiness with the struggle for collective liberation?

Like the choice to own a car, marriage is a personal decision connected to the oppression of others. If I choose to get married, am I turning my back on friends and comrades in same-sex relationships who never can?[9] Am I supporting an unequal institution imbued with racism and misogyny? Am I committing to extra hours of dish-washing and floor-mopping? Marriage, it should be noted, is less practically useful than a car. One can certainly get around in society without it, albeit with fewer economic benefits.

Just as some educators may choose public-school teaching in order to reform the system from inside, some radicals may seize the opportunity to reform marriage, to create their own, more-balanced reality within the institution. Yet what the University of Michigan study seems to suggest is that gender roles do in fact still govern relationships, even, perhaps, for progressive couples who may believe they are equally dividing housework. The difficulty of balancing family with work — a balance all "modern" women are expected to accomplish with grace — is a daunting prospect for me, and one that I believe has driven my early attempts to decide on a career quickly. So far, my like-minded partner and I do a pretty good job of balancing housework chores. But if we were to keep track of our hours doing housework, as the couples in the study did, I wonder if we would be surprised by what we discovered.

Some couples — including one I know well — have chosen to hold commitment ceremonies, which are like weddings minus the wedding. There is no exchanging of rings, changing of names or signing of government paperwork, and the lack of tax benefits is balanced by the benefit of — well, not having to be married.

Still, plenty of modern-day radicals and feminists do choose to marry, and some have inspired quite a backlash in the process. Jessica Valenti, founder of the blog *Feministing*, has written about her marriage ceremony, where she skipped the white dress, had both parents walk her down the aisle, kept her last name and confidently entered what she believed would be an equal

partnership.[10] But when her wedding was featured in the *New York Times* Style section, feminists and misogynists clambered over each other in their haste to call Valenti a hypocrite. Perhaps more than anything else, that debate revealed that today's feminists are conflicted about marriage (and that today's sexists are enabled by the Internet). Many young feminists, myself included, are internally conflicted over the prospect of marrying.

Personally, I like the idea of having a public ceremony — minus the religious trappings — where I declare my love for my partner in front of those I care about, and then we eat cake. I even like the idea of both of us being dressed up when we do this. But, particularly with the divorce rate as high as it is, I don't feel eager to enter an institution that I associate with social inequality and housework. In my foggy vision of the future, my partner and I stand before a gathering of family and friends and recite love poems or self-made vows, then share a meal with people we love. At some point, maybe, there is dancing, which, unlike marriage, Emma Goldman might have appreciated. Then we move on with our equal and independent lives, with some commitment to togetherness and chore-sharing. It's a simple idea, and one more ancient than the origin of property rights. Best of all, it means I don't have to dump my friend on Facebook.

Footnotes

1. The 2008 findings were part of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

2. Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005) 48.

3. Marlene Dixon, "Why Women's Liberation? Racism and Male Supremacy".

4. Simone de Beauvoir, trans. H.M. Parshley, *The Second Sex* (Vintage, 1989) 444.

5. Nancy Cott, "No Objections: What history tells us about remaking marriage," *Boston Review* January/February 2011.

6. See http://reproductivejustice.org

7. See "One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008," The Pew Center on the States.

8. See http://www.weddedblissinc.com/

9. This is not to say all people in same-sex relationships want to get married. There is a strong and right-minded branch of the queer rights movement that believes marriage, imbued in capitalism, oppression of women and state control is nothing to envy.

10. Jessica Valenti, "My big feminist wedding," *The Guardian,* April 24, 2009.