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Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a PostMarital Age

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It's an honor to be speaking at the Heritage Foundation, but I confess to feeling a bit fraudulent. Heritage is home to some of the giants in the field of family and poverty research; I'm thinking especially of Pat Fagan and Robert Rector. I feel a little like a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants. Nevertheless, I will try to tell you what I see from those shoulders.

We've been having the wrong conversation about marriage in this country. While we've been debating whether and how to renovate marriage, we've been ignoring that the old institution is not only old, but actually quite sick: sick in a way that threatens some of our most basic values. We have been a little like doctors standing above a patient, squabbling about what unit he should be sent to without bothering to diagnose his disease.

I'm going to begin to try to diagnose that disease by reciting a number of key facts that most of you probably have heard before:

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Half—actually, the number is probably closer to 40 percent—of all marriages end in divorce.

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A third of children are born to mothers who are not married; the Centers for Disease Control released a report recently showing numbers now appearing to be creeping up to 37 percent and likely to reach 40 percent in the next four or five years.

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There has been a threefold increase in the proportion of children growing up in singleparent families over the last 40 years.

All of this has been widely reported, and all of it is true. It's also gravely misleading.

In recent years researchers have begun to disaggregate these numbers by income and education, and what they've found is the following. Fifty years ago, there was not much difference in the way high school and collegeeducated women went about the marriage and baby business. Just about everyone got married before they had their children. That began to change by around 1960 when the percentage of unmarried women who became mothers inched up a bit.

By the late '60s, those numbers began to march forward dramatically, but what's striking is how different were the trajectories of collegeeducated women. Collegeeducated women never went in for the Murphy Brown thing; their percentages of outofwedlock childbearing never rose much above 4 percent. Women without a high school education present us with an entirely different story. Their numbers soared.

There was a similar divergence in divorce trends. Around 1960, Americans fell in love with divorce. Women of all sorts began divorcing. But by 1980, the divorce rate among

collegeteducated women tapered off. That was not the case with their less educated sisters. Though the rise slowed in the 1990s, their divorce rate continues to be about twice as high. The upshot is what I call the Marriage Gap. By 2000, only 10 percent of mothers with college degrees or more were living without husbands. (I seem to be related to or friends with an unusual percentage of them.) Compare that to the 36 percent of women without a college degree. As Christopher Jencks and David Ellwood, whose research I've relied on, conclude, "The rise in singleparent families is concentrated among blacks and the less educated. It hardly occurred at all among women with a college degree."

This would all be a curious though not highly consequential demographic fact, except for one thing: Children growing up in singleparent families don't do as well as children of married families. For one thing, they are far more likely to be poor. Thirty six percent of single female-headed families, 6 percent of marriedcouple families are in poverty. Virtually all—92 percent—of children whose families make over \$75,000 are living with their two parents. On the other end, only 20 percent of children living under \$15,000 are living with both parents.

But it's not just poverty that is at stake here. You can control for education, for income, for race, for number of siblings, but children from singleparent families—both as a result of divorce and as a result of nonmarriage—are more prone to just about every social problem in the book: school failure, delinquency, crime, early pregnancy, emotional difficulties, and a host of other problems.

At this point, the evidence that family structure is perhaps the greatest risk factor is so powerful that, as James Q. Wilson has joked, even sociologists have come to believe it. Researchers have found that single mothers tend to be less childcentered; their children watch more TV; they don't oversee homework as much as married mothers. The children of single mothers are less likely to go to college, and when they do, they are less likely to go to an elite college.

Jennifer Gerner, a Cornell professor, was puzzled some years ago when she noticed that only about 10 percent of her students were from divorced families. With a colleague, she went through the numbers at other top schools: same thing. Children who did not grow up with their two biological parents were half as likely to go to a selective college. As adults, they earned less and had lower occupational status. And here's the clincher: They are more likely to become single parents themselves.

This is the meaning of my title, *Marriage and Caste*. We are becoming a nation of separate and unequal families that threatens to last into the foreseeable future. On the one hand, welleducated women make more money. They get married, only then have their children, and raise them with their husbands. Those children are more likely to grow up to be welladjusted, to do well in school, to go to college, to marry and only then have children. On the other hand, we have lowincome women raising children alone who are more likely to be lowincome, to drop out of school or, if they do make it to college, go to a less elite college, and to become single parents themselves.

Marriage, I think you can argue when you look at the numbers, now poses an even larger social divide than race. As I said, we've been having the wrong conversation about marriage.

In the book, I look at two questions about the Marriage Gap that I want to touch on briefly. First, why does marriage make such a difference in children's lives? And second, how did we fall into the Marriage Gap?

The most commonsense answer to the first question—why does marriage make such a difference for children?—is what I call the strength in numbers thesis. Married couples have two incomes,

two sets of hands and eyes, two brains to problemsolve when Johnny has locked his little brother in the bathroom with the water in the tub running.

But there's a problem: Children from step families don't look a whole lot better than those from singlemother households. Those kids are not as likely to be poor, but they have more problems in school, with drugs, with early sexual activity, with going to an elite college, etc. Those kids have suffered through a divorce, but then how do we explain the inconvenient fact that children living with cohabiting parents also enjoy few of the benefits of intact parents?

The strength in numbers theory epitomizes a major reason we've been having the wrong conversation about marriage. Americans in particular think of marriage primarily as a relationship between two adults. Two adults decide to make public their love and commitment in a ceremony that these days makes Marie Antoinette look like a piker. The impact of the breakdown of marriage on children—and on the rest of society—proves that it is a great deal more than that. It is what social thinkers like to call a social institution but that I've begun to think of as a little like software for the human brain: It gives people megabytes of necessary info about how to live.

Let me explain what I mean. Marriage exists in every known society; it is what social scientists call a human universal. As a human universal, it defines the rights and responsibilities of parenthood. In addition, it has specific cultural meanings arising out of local history, economy, religion, and ideals. American marriage programs people to organize their lives according to a middleclass life script: childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood preparing for work through schooling, at least high school; marriage; and only then children.

The American marriage program also carries with it a set of ideals and beliefs that help promote our national identity: that children need their mothers and fathers and vice versa; that children need a great deal of nurturing; that parents need to devote themselves to their social and emotional and cognitive development—what I call the Mission; that people raise their children in a home which they will work absurd hours in order to try to own.

Western marriage, particularly Anglo-American marriage, has always been tied up with private property and the accumulation of wealth. Historically, to marry, young men had to have a plot of land to set up independent housekeeping; this was very different from other cultures where the young couple joined the clan and moved into the extended family home. In America, nearly 70 percent of households own their home, and the large majority of them are headed by married couples. In this sense, we might think of the Marriage Gap as consisting of an unmarried proletariat and married capitalists. According to a study by an Ohio State economist comparing married couples and singles and divorced, the average net wealth of married couples increases 16 percent a year; after 15 years, their net worth is 93 percent higher than singles or divorced.

Let me give you an example of what happens when someone grows up without the program, a number of whom I describe in my book. His name is Ben, a young thirtysomething African-American whom I spoke to at America Works, a welfaretowork program.

Seven years ago, Ben, who had never finished school and had trouble holding down a job, had a casual affair with a Dominican woman. She needed a place to stay, and he decided to help her out and gave her a key, and one thing led to another. She had a child, a boy, and Ben, remembering his mother's words—"when you make a baby, you raise a baby"—and also remembering his rage toward his own absent father, tried to stick around. But the relationship foundered. The couple broke up. They got together, and she became pregnant again. They broke up. They got back together. She had another child. Now Ben had fathered three children with a

woman he had never married and whom he not only didn't love, but also saw as an inadequate mother.

It should be evident that Ben was no thug. Ben is a very handsome, serious man who clearly had a sense of duty and responsibility. He struck me as bright, though deeply troubled by the situation he had created without meaning to. He had a dim sense of the Mission, though between his lack of money and his tumultuous relationship with his children's mother, he was unable to see it through very well. He wanted to buy his kids toys—"I never had any toys as a child," he told me—and take them to Boys Club, but his children's mother had no interest in any of that. I don't think the problem is simply that Ben did not marry this woman, the mother of his children. Ben's problem started way before he had his first child. He grew up without the program and without the script; and without those things, Ben drifted into an Accidental Family. This is the situation for many single parents. When you ask a 24-year-old, low-income, single woman whether she planned to get pregnant, what you'll frequently hear is "kinda, sorta." When I asked the men I spoke to where they imagined themselves being in 10 years, they looked at me blankly.

What I'm suggesting is that without a program, people lose a way of organizing their lives, a life script, a means of orienting themselves toward the future, and a way to build wealth. It's remarkable that only 8 percent of those who follow the script (that is, who graduate high school) are poor; 79 percent of those who do not are poor like Ben. The script is vitally important not just for people of marriageable age, but for children and adolescents. It tells them where they are going and what matters. The pursuit of a (hopefully) permanent partner is an essential project for the young. It forces them to try to know themselves, to consider how they want to live, to plan their careers, to think about how they want to build enough wealth for a comfortable life or, if the urge is there, for penthouses and limousines. It builds self-restraint and self-knowledge.

So what happened to create the Marriage Gap, to cause men like Ben to lose any inkling of a script that might have led him to a more stable life for their children, who might in turn have pulled their way into the middle class? In the 1960s, Americans began a radical, historically unique experiment. Marriage and childbearing were really two separate life phenomena. Marriage was about adult happiness. People started saying, "Don't stay together for the sake of kids." Meanwhile, the question occurred to many: Why do you need to be married when you have children?

Some people conclude from this that Americans started to lose interest in marriage. Not really. Census Bureau numbers have it that 90 percent of American women will marry at some point in their lives, and close to the same percentage of men. In fact, compared to other Westerners, Americans are marriage nuts. Ask them in surveys, and they say a good marriage and family life are extremely important to them.

No, what our out-of-wedlock birth rate means is not that people don't care about marriage; it's that they see marriage as simply a committed adult love relationship and not an arrangement for rearing children. You may want to get married, but that doesn't mean you want to have children with the guy.

In other words, Americans took one of the most fundamental messages of the marriage program—that children should be born and raised by their two parents—and threw it into the dustbin of history.

Very few people questioned what was happening in the early decades of this revolution as the number of single-parent households began to rise. Those who did, like the late Senator Daniel Moynihan in his 1965 paper "The Negro Family," whose aftermath I recount in Chapter 3 of

Marriage and Caste, learned that they were going to be ridiculed and shunned. Even today, people are uneasy confronting the problem of the separation of marriage and childbearing with any honesty. They are willing to make education a national good, a route to a better life, but not marriage.

My final point is this: This lack of clarity and cultural consensus about the decline of the American marriage program is a dangerous mistake. Think of the past decades of rising divorce and illegitimacy as a kind of natural experiment testing what happens when you unravel the institution of marriage.

The results are now in. Changing the institution—specifically, erasing the bond between marriage and child rearing—leads to a weakening of our country's ability to carry out its promise: its promise of fairness, equality, opportunity, and prosperity. Instead, we see separate and unequal families as far as the eye can see.

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