

It's the End of Marriage as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)



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I don't love marriage. I don't love the religious nature of the ceremony or that it is a commitment ratified by a god or the fact that the government has chosen this uniquely religious ceremony as the primary way to legally codify personal unions. I don't love how insanely expensive it has become. I don't love its history of condoning chattel ownership paradigms of women. I don't love its tacit implication that monogamous or forever relationships are the ideal. I don't love how it normalizes the mistreatment of children born outside the institution. I don't love that society has established marriage as a required line of demarcation into adulthood that lays bare flaws and faults in those who do not or choose not to jump the broom. That said, I don't believe its trending decrease is either good or bad. As sociologist Eric Klinenberg states (2012), the rising rate of singlehood currently seen in the US is an outcome of social change rather than a sign of social decline. As such, if any couple wishes to participate in the institution, even if it's something I'm not a fan of, I believe that it is absolutely their choice to do so. I would not dissuade them from or ridicule them for choosing this path. Its decrease is not a causative agent of some kind of societal shift or decline as so many on the nonsecular right so fervently decry; rather, it is the logical outcome of changes in society that include broader recognition of same-sex relationships, decreased stigmatization of single-parent or non-traditional families, increased secularization, decreased emphasis on "legitimate" heirs and inheritance, and the rather simple, broader recognition that the whole thing is kind of silly.

If you pay any attention to popular media, you are likely to see consistent hysteria from the religious, conservative right that society is in rapid moral decline driven primarily by attacks on "traditional family" and "family values." The tacit implication being made here is that being straight, monogamous, married, possessing a binary gender identity that does not vary from

biological sex assigned at birth, and pumping out offspring is the only true, correct, and American ideal for adults—as long as they're older than 14, of course. Any sign of movement away from the “nuclear family” paradigm is seen to be an attack on faith, god, and Americanism itself. It seems ludicrous to elevate marriage to such a pivotal status when it is clear that it has failed society rather than the other way around. We live in a world where a couple's first marriage is just as likely to fail as it is to enjoy long-term success (Gaspard, 2016). Subsequent marriage attempts are even more likely to end in divorce with close to a 60% failure rate, 10% higher than first marriages (Gaspard, 2016). Moreover, the most fervent marriage supporters—in spite of every conceivable form of social coercion to do so—have resolutely refused to adapt marriage from a patriarchal and primitive ceremony of property consolidation and name exchange to something more modern, inclusive, and relevant.

LGBTQ+ couples have spent decades seeking marriage equality to achieve privilege parity with straight/cis couples only to have this simple legal right rebuffed, fought against, and finally made legal by Supreme Court fiat, only to go on to be attacked at every level of local, state, and federal government by the right since. I have long supported legislation that would cease to recognize marriage as the mechanism for governments to legally sanction personal unions. If a religious person wants to participate in a religious ceremony as a component of their civil union, fantastic, but it is long past time for the government to be out of the actual marriage business. If the government must somehow be involved in your coupling decisions, then let it be a civil union for everyone who wants one.

And why not? With an average cost ballooning in the US to a near-record high average cost of \$30,000 (The Knot, 2023), which is up \$2,000 from the previous year, marriage itself has devolved into a ridiculously expensive, ostentatious show of consumerist one-upmanship with

every marriageable couple of even moderate means focused on creating the most amazing and extravagant circus of conspicuous consumption, obsessed with outdoing their friends or achieving parity with the nonsense portrayed in popular media. That average can have serious variability based on geographic area, with the New York Metropolitan Area clocking in at an average all-in cost of \$60,000 (The Knot, 2023). Even engagements have become a social media-ready photo op with appropriately gaudy performative fanfare whose “two months of salary” centerpiece is almost always sourced using slave and child labor from areas where the money is used to finance genocide and other war crimes. It's not all bad news on the financial front, though. Another marriage survey (Seaver, 2015) finds that bargain-hunting brides and grooms-to-be can glean big savings for themselves by planning destination weddings abroad. The only downside to saving yourselves over \$4,000 is that you must be sufficiently self-absorbed to demand that your guests shell out their own money for airfare and accommodations while taking off extended periods from work.

Why? Why are people so excited to put aside their ethics and spend outrageous sums of money that could arguably be more responsibly spent on a house or anything that isn't an extravagant one-day event? Why spend this money on something that is so statistically prone to failure? I believe that more and more people are starting to question the wisdom of this, another stake in the heart of marriage rates. According to data reported by the United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics (ONS) only 18.7% of marriages in the UK were religious in nature in 2019 (*Marriages in England and Wales*, 2022), meaning that if couples are opting for marriage at all, they are choosing much simpler ceremonies held outside of a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque often performed by a civil servant or recently “ordained” (online, most likely) friend rather than an actual religious authority—40% in 2015 up from 29% in 2009 (Stauffer, 2019). If

we're going to make a risky investment, probably best to limit the financial blast radius as best we can.

After all, there don't seem to be a lot of compelling reasons to tie the knot these days. Society—especially Western society—is becoming increasingly secular. Regular church attendance and even basic belief in “god” are at historic lows of 31% (*U.S. church attendance, 2023*) and 81% (*How many Americans, 2019*) respectively. This is a double-digit decline for both figures over just the last ten (10) years! As religion itself becomes more and more deprioritized, it stands to reason that the rites associated with it are commensurately minimized in relevancy.

The pressure to marry is further minimized by the fact that social taboos surrounding single parenthood and other “nontraditional” family systems are becoming increasingly diminished as society evolves. Single people or people in devoted monogamous or nonmonogamous relationships have at their fingertips every possible means of family development and upkeep, almost every one of which is now as available to them as they are to married couples. Adoption by single mothers? No problem (but single fathers are still sadly discriminated against by the adoption system). Artificial insemination to have a baby with a stranger from a sperm bank? Also, not an issue. Need to have a job so can't be at home to manage the needs of your growing family? We have ubiquitous—albeit ridiculously expensive—professional childcare for offspring aged 0 to whenever. Almost no one who isn't a religious, right-wing zealot looks down their nose in judgment at single mothers. Almost no one uses the word “bastard” as a pejorative description of a child born of dubious parentage. As the civil penalty for failing to adhere to these social mores decrease, so, too, does jumping through the procedural hoops that have addressed them for centuries. Even as access to abortion becomes increasingly restricted in red states with the overturning of *Roe v Wade*, this and other means of

reproductive autonomy have made it possible for “accidents” to happen without lifelong consequences or rushing to the altar at the barrel of a shotgun.

Marriage's once critical role in ensuring intergenerational property, wealth, and peerage has also precipitously diminished with the advent of a widespread legal profession. We adjudicate estate distribution on death through wills. We protest these allocations through probate processes in court. We no longer use marriage as a means by which a man subsumes the property and dowery of his bride and deletes her own familial lineage, and, for the most part, mainstream society has thankfully stopped trading women as property in general. And for all our many faults in terms of class and income inequality, the US has long since abandoned the concept of titles, peerages, and other trappings of an aristocracy.

When you really examine all these glaring issues with the institution of marriage, it's difficult not to feel healthy skepticism at its value and may, as I do, find the entire thing kind of silly. In spite of this, it is not unusual for unmarried people to find themselves stigmatized by unconscious bias regarding their marital status. According to Elyakim Kislev (2019) when 1,000 undergraduate students were surveyed, they identified married people as “mature, happy, loving, and honest” (p. 82), whereas their single counterparts were seen as “immature, insecure, self-centered, sad, and lonely” (p. 82). Why then does the social pressure still exist to spend tens of thousands of dollars glorifying a broken system at the expense of personal freedom only to spend tens of thousands more to sever the union when it turns out to be unworkable for one or both parties? If in any other context you offered a person an investment opportunity that would cost \$50,000 to get your foot in the door with no real upside—other than, perhaps, not being pressured by peers and family to make said investment—and a close to 50% chance that you

would have to pony up another \$50,000 just to get out of it, they would look at you like you'd lost your mind and almost certainly laugh in your face. It's frankly ludicrous.

The "failure" of the fabric of marriage comes as a result of dozens of tiny tears and pinpricks that come from a rapidly evolving society—and that's not a bad thing, or, certainly, nothing to get too wound up about. Society is arguably progressing in a positive direction to be more inclusive, more secular, and more equal, driving institutions like marriage to the periphery of social consciousness and importance, perhaps slowly but certainly. Since marriage has been unable—more likely, unwilling—to accommodate these rapid changes, we are simply throwing it to the side, and no one is worse off for that decision.

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