

Marriage – the Dream that refuses to die Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

Fox-Genovese likes certainty, Marxist or Catholic

Women have finally got everything they want -- and they aren't happy. Fox Genovese' message is that modern marriage, which is seen as a vehicle for fulfilling the personal desires of men and women, fails on most counts. It does not satisfy the partners, it shortchanges their children, and it does not fulfill at all the societal role of perpetuating a culture, or even repopulating it.

Fox Genovese described a situation that is full of inherent contradictions, but the ideologies she has embraced, first Marxism and now Catholicism, are not sufficiently nuanced to wrap themselves around the contradictions. Also, she remains enough of a Marxist to take several swipes at big business as promoting policies that undermine the family. I disagree -- big business is guilty only of being gutless, or uninterested, in opposing these changes in society.

Christianity says that you have to lose your soul in order to gain it. This is certainly true in family life -- you have to give yourself to your spouse and to your children in order to get the satisfaction that they can bring. You have to give up independence and enter into interdependence. This concept is at odds with individualism, which has been growing steadily since the era of Edmund Burke and John Locke, whom she quotes liberally.

She describes a construct called "compassionate marriage" which she claims arose about 1750, just prior to the age of Revolution. It is marriage for love, as exemplified by Jane Austen's novels, and in contrast to arranged marriages. She claims that this compassionate marriage was the standard until about 1950, since which time it has been supplanted by an atomistic marriage, one which is entered into more or less for the pleasure of the individual partners.

Compassionate marriage being her frame of reference, it is worth examining its historical authenticity. Though she does not say so, it would correspond in time to the move into cities and the development of middle-class. James Q. Wilson, in "The Marriage Problem," says that marriage for love originated several centuries earlier, primarily in England, when a young farmer in a position to support a wife would choose one freely from among the village maidens. Wilson saw marriage as an economic unit, woman and man working together in agriculture and to raise children. Fox Genovese sees it as man the head of the household and protector and woman in charge of raising children and maintaining hearth and home... a hard line between public and private life.

Fox Genovese claims that feminists rebelled against the constraints and abuses that were found in compassionate marriage. A man could philander and abuse his wife, and she was not free to do much about it. She quotes the same source, Blackstone, the first to compile a reference of English law, three times in this short work. Blackstone said that a family is a separate unit, and the woman and children no more than appendages to the man, without separate legal standing. She agrees that the problems identified by the feminists were real, but that the supposed solution to the problem, total independence from men, was a chimera.

Coming from her newfound Catholic beliefs, she says simply that satisfaction is not to be found in independence and in abandoning responsibilities. As the Bible says, we live for each other and for God, not for ourselves.

Discussing other changes in our society since the watershed year of 1963, the year of "The Feminine Mystique," she says that birth control and abortion have had the ironic effect of freeing men from family responsibility. With women now able to be safely promiscuous, sexual partners are easier to find. If one of them gets pregnant, the man has no obligation because the woman should have avoided the problem, or can solve it through an abortion. Neither sex feels compelled to make a commitment to marriage. Since marriage is now a matter of individual pleasure, other arrangements such as homosexual partnering and cohabitation can claim to be morally equivalent to marriage.

Fox Genovese does not investigate the detrimental effect on all of society of our choice first, not to have children, and secondly, not to make the same material and emotional investments that we used to in raising those children, or to teach them moral values which we ourselves have abandoned. She cites several cases in which Catholics do not adhere to the professed beliefs of the church. She could go further, making the claim for all religions, and in fact for the abandonment of belief in our country, our community, or any other entity larger than ourselves.

She does not weigh the trade-offs. She is sympathetic to gays, and agrees that women were often abused. What can we do to maintain the privileged status of marriage, and yet admit the existence of gays and women's need for self-realization? The answer has to be nuanced, a matter of shades of gray, which her Catholicism does not admit. This book winds up being a good statement of the problem but does not offer much in the way of solutions, especially for nonbelievers.