

## The marriage problem – how our culture has weakened marriage

### James Q. Wilson

This book appeared in 2002, long enough ago that it needs some historical perspective. President Clinton had recently implemented welfare reform, curtailing Aid to Families with Dependent Children. America's major cities had recently implemented the "Broken Windows" theory of policing advocated by this author, James Q. Wilson. Crime rates were coming down from their recent highs, but crime remained a major concern in American cities.

Wilson was 71 years old, a well-established academic who would live another 10 years. His thesis is that many of the social problems that existed in America, and in particular those affecting the black community, could be traced back to a decline of the institution of marriage. His thesis is that marriage should be encouraged to the extent possible by law and custom. He is pessimistic on the culture/custom side, conceding that not much is likely to be done. For that reason the book is more of a description of the situation at the time of the writing and an explanation of how it came to be than a prescription for change.

Here are brief descriptions of the books 9 chapters.

#### Two Nations

The thesis in this chapter is that America is divided into the middle class and an underclass. The two are culturally quite different. In the underclass, work is not terribly common, marriage is not respected, and crime and promiscuity run rampant. There is a major racial aspect of this. Although both Hispanics and Blacks are poor, Hispanics are inclined to be married and to stay together, Blacks inclined not to marry.

#### Why Do Families Exist?

Family has existed throughout the history of mankind. Marriage is taken many forms. It may begin with the church ceremony, a couples moving in together, or the birth of her first child. The important thing is that it is recognized by society and enforced by society. Society has a vested interest in the well-being of which younger members, and in the parents of the children paying for their upbringing.

Men and women have different interests in a marriage. While they of course overlap, men tend to be more concerned with the paternity of their children, and women in the man's providing ongoing support.

#### Sex and the Marriage Market

The sex ratio is the major theme in this chapter. It is "The number of men per hundred women in a society" when there are more men than women, it is a high sex ratio. A high sex ratio favors women, who can drive a harder bargain, requiring that men commit to marriage, and allowing the woman to select a partner with better earning potential.

There have been historical times of low sex ratios, such as after major wars when large numbers of men have been decimated. African Americans suffer a perpetually low sex ratio because of their rates of mortality, incarceration, and drug addiction and unemployment, all of which make them poor marriage prospects.

For any number of reasons, sex ratios have been low in most developed countries for a while now. Implications for marriage are not good.

#### The Rise of the Modern Marriage

Modern marriage appears to have emerged in medieval England and northern Europe. English yeoman farmers were independent in large measure from their families and from feudal lords. They ran their own show. They had more freedom instead choosing their own wives than other societies in the world. The young man would stake out a farmstead and get it started and then marry when he had it established. The marriage was consensual; the women had the power to refuse and to choose.

The pattern was different in other parts of the world. In the Middle East social life was controlled by tribes, cousin marriage was common, and the selection of marriage partners was largely determined by the elders. The same was true in China and Japan. Although the partners had a say in the matter, the elders provided extensive guidance. This is also true in Eastern Europe where there were communal farms, no land to be inherited. Wilson's description is a variance with what one reads elsewhere, but in any case there was little private ownership. He contends ownership was communal, by the people who work the land. Other authors contend it was by large landholders, often called boyars.

In Africa the scarce resource was labor to work the rather infertile soil, not the soil itself. Women generally managed the hoe gardening while men did the politicking and the warfare. Polygamous arrangements made sense. Since there was nothing to inherit, paternity was not a compelling issue. Monogamy was not highly prized.

Among American Indians it was similar. They needed lots of babies, but who fathered them didn't matter too much. They were all closely related in any case. Wilson relates that the situation was not ideal; there was quite a bit of jealousy. Other anthropologists are not so strongly convinced about the jealousy issue. In any case, monogamy was not strictly observed. Even Benjamin Franklin observed (I add as an aside) that colonial women kidnapped by Indians and forced to join their tribes were often reluctant when "liberated" to return to the more restrictive conventions of the English colonists.

Women have been gaining more power in Western society since the Enlightenment. Even before the Industrial Revolution they had a high level of social freedom. The French court gave women a great deal of latitude in both intellectual and romantic life. See the biography of Franklin for how this played out in dalliances.

The Victorian era saw a return to emphasis on traditional morality: monogamy, fidelity, and also the virtues of temperance and support of social betterment movements. Divorce rates were low, but rose consistently. World War I marked the end of the era. Since that time social liberalism has expanded constantly, accelerating particularly in the 1920s and 1960s.

### African Americans and Slavery

Many authors attribute the situation in African-American families to slavery and Jim Crow. While Wilson does not totally discount these factors, he notes that marriage and sexual relations among African-Americans followed patterns that were well-established in Africa itself.

He alludes to cultural and genetic differences. He edges up to the Overton window of acceptable opinion on the reasons for the observed behavior in the African-American community, but does not go beyond. For a more open discussion, read Philippe Rushton.

### Mother – Only Families

The question here is whether Murphy Brown is a viable role model. No, concludes Wilson, families with fathers do better by almost every measure.

### Divorce

Divorce is increasingly easy. The grounds for divorce have softened. It used to be that adultery was about the only argument that the courts would accept. Now it is divorce by mutual consent – three quarters of divorces do not involve accusations of abuse by either party.

Easier divorce is a logical conclusion from Enlightenment thinking. It favors the individual over the family. Children get lost in the shuffle. Some argue that children are better off after a divorce and living in the household of an unhappy marriage. Wilson generally disagrees.

### Working Mothers

Working mothers have to have some sort of childcare. It is a given that the caretakers do not in general see their role as passing on culture, standards of behavior, and other such values that the parents might hold. How do the kids turn out? Smart but nasty is one take. They get fairly used to being around other kids, manipulating them, but they become rather self-centered.

### The Cultural Challenge

The conclusion is not terribly strong. Pulling together all of his observations, Wilson does not do more than simply observe that this is the way things are. He hopes for the best.