

Baby This is Forever

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This year my partner and I will celebrate 30 years of living in sin. In fact we've been happily unmarried for so long that I am thinking of applying for heritage status with the Office of National Statistics. According to official figures we represent a considerable anomaly. Despite having raised one boy and step-parented two others, our union should by now have foundered on the very rocks of cohabitation that we innocently regard as its strengths.

The real victims of unorthodox unions such as ours, it appears, are the children. The suggested solution is to tax cohabitation off the planet and start marriage classes in kindergarten. I would like to expose as specious the assumptions behind this policy. It will do little for the children who need to be put at the heart of our social concerns, as I show below, while stimulating the Right into a dangerous frenzy.

New research says that unmarried parents are five times more likely to break up than married ones; that 75 per cent of all family breakdowns where there are young children now involve unmarried parents, and that 'Family failure is no longer driven by divorce but by the collapse of unmarried partnerships' (The Times, February 5th 2005). This has caused more excitement among family fundamentalists than the second coming of George Bush.

I am truly bemused by the huzzas from the New Nuptial Movement. I believe that what is being overlooked here is the firm probability that any statistical association between cohabitation and family breakup is co-incidental rather than causal. I suspect the real culprit is nothing whatever to do with marital status but with a widespread absence of modern parenting skills in a state-financed sub-culture of recklessly un-planned birth.

I further suggest our obsession with weddings distracts attention from the one really portentous vow we ever have to make in life, namely our decision to reproduce. I find it scandalous that we make so much relative fuss about the scale of pre and extra-marital sex while remaining utterly blasé when parents enter a second union before they've finished looking after the children from the first. I would prefer to live in a society where anyone who caused a birth was deemed to be legally, morally and fiscally 'MARRIED' to that child for 20 years at least. This is where legal and ideological reforms need to bite. Technically, you can never divorce your children, nor should you try. But in our society men, in particular, sometimes dump their offspring in order to achieve a more gratifying relationship.

What we seem to have forgotten is something wolves and tigers never forget. We need to suffer for our offspring, to lose body fat if necessary, to come second third and fourth in the pecking order, place careers on hold, lose sleep, slog on when depression is a visitor and accept that there will be an inevitable deterioration in the quality of our spousal union, as the pertinent research always attests, precisely because having children is expensive and they make you tired. When children need you most, during teenage, they show it least. This is the time you will be told to fuck off by the unpleasant Kevin inside every tormented pubescent and you need to hold the boundaries of decency, taste and commitment through these perils. Just scan the horizon – by the time they are 27 they will have *turned into you* – *don't lose the plot*.

So more emphasis on marriage is hardly the answer. As a therapist, I understand the reasons why the majority of my fellow citizens *will* decide to marry. It is a traditional institution with something to recommend it. At the very least, you end up being called husband and wife instead of that litany of uncertainties commencing with 'partner' and ending in 'whatsit'.

However, I object to matrimonial ideology. One of the joys of my arrangement is that I and my partner have **never** taken each other for granted - indeed would have been foolish to do so. A voluntary partnership requires constant affirmation. We have no stereotypes to snare us - no 'ball and chain', no 'er indoors', no 'old man' or 'old lady'. We retain our individual identities.

Traditional marriage, by contrast, strikes me as an implicit cause of divorce. The terms of the marital contract are grandiose, sketchy and in some cases impossible to fulfil. You cannot promise to be the same person for the next five years let alone for the rest of your days. The basic causes of domestic friction are never addressed. Where in the marriage contract does it tell you whether to have one bank account or two? Or who takes the children to school? Who loads and empties the dishwasher?

As for sex, the traditional ideal, while silent on the need for good pillow books, manages to make a fetish of phallic penetration. To this day, no marriage is lawful in this land until a husband's penis enters his wife's vagina. Apparently, oral sex and mutual masturbation won't do. Church and state require intromission. This, I contend, is a distasteful invasion of personal liberty.

Underpinning such objections, I suspect, are contemporary philosophic shifts away from the official regulation of private feelings or personal morality. I have never believed my domestic sleeping arrangements are the business of any man or woman from any ministry. I 'married' my partner, as it were, in the act of choosing to make a home with her, as she did with me. Today, fully one third of men and a quarter of all women prefer to cohabit. This to me represents the most truly authentic 'deregulation' of the Thatcher era - the 'privatisation of marriage'.

To those who still promote the research on marriage's greater durability, I ask which university of the blindingly obvious did they attend? The state of marriage, by definition, attracts all those who believe in lifelong monogamy, including heavy-duty Catholics, Jews and Muslims. Cohabitation, on the other hand, includes those who say things like 'Well why don't you move in for a bit and we'll see how it goes but no great dramas if we split up, eh?' When you compare apples with pears you get sour grapes.

To those who claim marriage offers more security because it's harder to wriggle out of let me break the sad news that one third of all new marriages still ends in divorce within the first five years. *In fact, more than 430 marriages in England and Wales die daily.* If, as a cohabitee, I find myself in similar perils, a divorce process would of course prove unnecessary but do you imagine for one moment that there are no emotional, legal, family and social ties, not to mention ties of outright blackmail, that after a number of years bind and secure two people just as tightly - or rather loosely - as those stemming from a wedding? So why seek to replace one allegedly failing institution (cohabitation) by an incontrovertibly failing one (marriage)?

I think we need to update our folklore. The narrative mantra ought to run: - 'You go into puberty. You eventually have safe sex. Then you have some more. You leave education. You grow up. You shack up. You break up. You settle into your career

zone. You live with someone else. And then comes your truly, madly, deeply BIG DAY. Shall we have a baby?'

I believe all the emphasis in our legislative and tax system, as well as the organisation of private ceremonies, should be poured into this single, defining moment. The state ought to be preoccupied with parenting, not partnering. The vital question for any responsible adult is mating, not marriage. Ring out those natal bells! Comparatively speaking, marriage is a ceremonial toy.