

“For Richer or Poorer”: Materialism’s Corruption of Marriage and Family, Past and Present, and Moral Solutions to Its Problems

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Since the middle of the twentieth century, marriage and family life in the United States and Western Europe have undergone a transformation of a magnitude never before seen in human history. This paper is about the material causes of that change, describing the economic forces that shaped the old system of family relations and those that are causing the new one. The economic developments behind this transformation are, in themselves, good, offering unparalleled potential for health, wisdom, social equality, personal happiness and love. But at the same time, unless handled wisely, these developments also carry with them serious threats to personal, marital, and family happiness. By examining carefully what has happened to marriage and the family in the United States and Western Europe, Uganda, a nation posed part-way between the old and new systems, might make decisions today that will allow her people to enjoy the benefits of this rich new world while avoiding its dangers.

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The underlying premise of this paper is that observation that, in the absence of strong moral voice or spiritual values, the practices and attitudes of individuals, societies, and families are largely determined by what is rewarded by their material environments. That this is so accounts for why the academic field of economics has been successful in its recent attempts to explain aspects of human behavior that fall into categories not normally thought of as “economic.” Defining economics as “the study of the choices people make in allocating scarce resources among competing ends,” allows social scientists to study not only the stock market and interest rates but also how we choose to allocate our time, energy, interest, love, commitment, and beliefs. This application of economic tools to non-market behavior was pioneered by Nobel-prize winning economist Gary S. Becker, who has himself written on the economics of crime, discrimination, divorce, polygamy and addiction. My husband, Laurence R. Iannaccone, and his colleagues use economic tools and concepts to understand religious behavior. Here I apply insights from Becker’s seminal book, *A Treatise on the Family*,¹ to understanding why the “traditional family” looked the way it did. I then extend his model to explain why the modern Western family looks less and less like a family at all.

But as we apply economic principles to understanding the family, recognize that while economically motivated behavior may be rational, understandable, and predictable, the fact that a practice is rational or even “optimal” does not mean that it is necessarily moral, right, or conducive to human happiness in the long run. As we will see, the logic of the old family system encourages family members to use each other as tools of production. Under it, men and women marry in order to further their own or their families’ material interests. They have children to work for them and to serve them.

In contrast, contemporary Western economic forces allow people to view family members almost as items of consumption or perhaps a different kind of production: Men and women marry because the other person meets their emotional needs, and if that person ceases to meet those needs, they feel free to divorce. Similarly, in the new system parents have children for emotional reasons: because they believe kids are fun, because they crave someone to love them, or because the child's accomplishments bring the parents prestige. This set of motives seems more benign than the first, but on closer examination we find that it is ultimately no less self-centered and materialistic. When good interpersonal relationships, the well-being of family members, and social goods occur, they are often despite, rather than because of, the material motivations themselves. For no matter how wealthy a society gets, there are no economic solutions to problems of family dysfunction, marital discord and ultimately, interpersonal injustice in all its forms. Rather, the answers are moral and spiritual. Fortunately, as human beings we can transcend many of these materially-driven bad practices, employing moral and spiritual values to find a higher level. The challenge in the twenty-first century is to identify and implement those redeeming spiritual attitudes and practices – a challenge faced equally by both the developing and the developed world.

The Origins of Hierarchical Family Structure: The Sexual Division of Labor and the Subordination of Women

Hierarchical family structures were and are the way of life when production is centered in households. In the not-too-distant past, households produced for themselves virtually everything they consumed. As recently as nineteenth century America, for

instance, households would purchase metal tools and salt, which generally could not be produced at home, but grew or made everything else.² Although consumer goods have found their way into most parts of the globe today, in many developing countries families at the subsistence level consume little besides what they themselves grow, make, or for which they trade their own produce. The demands of such household production mean that a household requires many members. In such economies, a young couple might start off alone, but hired servants or acquired slaves as soon as they could possibly afford them.³

As Becker notes, however, a better source of labor than servants was children. The loyalty of servants was always in doubt: Even the wealthy were considered to be putting their lives at risk if they had no one to care for them in illness but servants.⁴ Children, in contrast, were much more likely to be devoted to their family's welfare, if for no other reason than that their family's welfare was also their own. Moreover, children didn't have to be paid, and they could be produced at home. The great economist Adam Smith estimated that in colonial America, a child's labor contributed 100 English pounds sterling to his family before he left home, a substantial sum of money in those days.

The difference in fertility rates between a modern industrialized nation, where the average woman bears fewer than two children, and an agricultural nation like Uganda, where the average woman bears seven, reflects not so much a greater love for children, a devotion to a religion that forbids the use of contraceptives, or the relative unavailability of birth control – which is what an American might think when he sees a family with many children – as it does a greater need for farming and other household help. In

addition, in the absence of governmental or private programs to care for people in their old age, disability, illness, or widowhood, children are a critical source of support and care. While in the United States today infertility is viewed as a personal heartbreak, in an unindustrialized country a couple's inability to bear children can be an economic disaster.

When a need for large families is combined with high rates of child mortality (and in Europe's not-so-distant past, even wealthy families were lucky if they had a couple of children who survived to adulthood⁵), women are under a constant obligation to bear children. American fertility figures from 1800 indicate that, like modern-day Ugandans, prior to the industrial revolution the average American woman bore over 7 children in her lifetime (in contrast, in 2000 the American average was less than two.)

In a non-industrialized world, child bearing and rearing are often woman's most important contribution to the household economy. However, household production makes innumerable other demands on a woman's labor. Becker traces traditional family structure and what economists call "the sexual division of labor" (the pattern of men and women performing different tasks) to these additional demands on a mother's time.⁶ Frequent pregnancies combined with the fact that until fifty or sixty years ago there was no substitute for human breast milk limited the kind of work that women could sensibly do. Very heavy or strenuous labor can result in miscarriage; breast feeding requires women to stay close to their infant; childcare encourages women to avoid work that endangers small children. Families quickly learned to divide up the work so that mothers could do the tasks that were compatible with childbearing. In Europe in the past, spinning was the consummate female task, as it was easy to put down when a child needed to be picked up. The next steps in clothing construction – weaving and sewing –

were similarly compatible with childcare.⁷ So sewing became “women’s work.” Cooking is a time-consuming task in the absence of pre-processed foodstuffs. Mothers, already housebound, are the logical persons to supervise the rising of the leaven and baking bread and to assure that the stew didn’t boil dry. Women are the ones to grow vegetables for household use, and in places such as Africa where the plow is not used, they do the farming as well.⁸ Women nurse the sick and the aged, process herbs to make medicines, and supervise family hygiene, important and often time-consuming tasks in a world that is rife with deadly infections. Women might be directly active in household trade: In the United States, farm women often kept the financial accounts. Wives supervised the work of slaves involved in commercial production in the wealthy households of ancient Greece and Rome, and less wealthy women kept the shops where such family produce was sold.

As a result of the accommodations made for child bearing and nurture, women’s traditional work bound them to the home in a way that men’s did not. What a society defines as “men’s work” is determined by what is left over after the women do what they can while pregnant and with children present. Historically, men rather than women cleared the land, and were the hunters, blacksmiths, long-distance traders, sailors, and warriors. After all, one could not go to war, to sea or to Parliament, work a forge, fell a tree or plow a field with a nursing infant in arms and young children in tow.

The constraints on women’s activities caused by childbearing greatly restricted the kind of careers that were considered appropriate for the women. The eighteenth century English wool trade provides an excellent example of the effect of these limitations. As long as wool production and trade was domestically based, women excelled. When trade expanded across the channel into continental Europe, however,

women were unable to leave their families in order to follow it. As a result, the wool business was taken over by men.⁹

Further, for a woman to attempt to carry out both household production and marketplace activities often resulted in overwork and posed a serious threat to a woman's health.¹⁰ In subsistence economies, women almost always choose domestic life over a career, as the potential career woman could not compete with her own alternative of wife and mother. In such economies, women work outside of the home or at "men's work" only when they are single, widowed, or their husbands are disabled. In Africa historically, a woman who was past menopause and whose youngest child was grown enjoyed a much broader range of activities than she did in her childbearing years.²

Although many academic theories about gender claim that men became dominant over women because of man's superior size, strength, and aggression, traditional family structure is better understood when it is seen to be based on a unique *feminine* characteristic: woman's ability to bear children. Even if women were bigger and stronger than men, as the only ones who could bear and feed children women would still have ended up specialized to the home.¹¹

Domestic Specialization and the Subordination of Women

For most women, their "domestic specialization" was not a remarkable problem. Few men had a choice about what they would do in life, either — historically, 90% of the population, male and female, were peasants — and aside from childbearing, men got stuck with the most dangerous and nasty work. Ultimately, however, it is the constraints

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of scarcity and the resulting need for women to bear children that allowed men in general to become dominant over women. The economic model tells us that the very thing that made a woman valuable – her unique ability to bear children – also made her economically dependent.¹² The things that a wife and mother produced may have been essential to her family's survival, but she produced them for one particular household and for one particular set of people. Her most valuable product, children, were of most worth to their own father. In a sense, this made a woman's husband and household her employer, and she could change employment only at the price of a major and risky disruption in her life. She could certainly work in someone else's household, but there she would be a servant, not mistress of the house. Under most conditions historically, women who left their marriages also left all of what they produced in the first household, including, most likely, their children, who in such cultures are usually considered to belong to their fathers. Those who did keep their children put them at risk when they remarried (switched "employers"), as step-parents were notoriously more concerned about their own welfare than about that of children who owed them no fealty (hence all the evil step-mothers in European fairy tales).

In contrast, the husband's skills were more flexible. Less tied to the household, he could change employers far more easily than a wife could.¹³ This broader base of demand for men's labor made husbands less dependent in the marital relationship. Men's greater access to paid work also gave them the option of spending their income on themselves. In Uganda, coffee, a significant cash crop, is raised and harvested by women, but it is usually their husbands who take it to market and who receive the cash – cash that they may or may not share with their wives.

As many of the government and business issues that determine civic power historically were of little concern to a busy housewife, her domestic, family-centered roles also mean that she will have less impact in the community than a man. Women in the subsistence economies do not get involved in the activities that give men power over each other and over women – war, long-distance trade, finance, politics – simply because concerns that did not affect home life directly were literally none of women’s business. The high cost of education compounded women’s indifference: few women knew enough about political (or religious) issues to think of holding political or church office, or of even voting. Working knowledge of war and the military were historically important components of political power, and simply not available to women. Although she may hold considerable power within her domestic areas of concern, a housewife had little decision-making authority or ability outside it. Thus the strong economic need for women to bear children results in the economic realities of separate spheres for men and women and in women’s subordination to men in family, society, government, and the church.

Hierarchical Family Structures and Men

While women in pre-industrial economics are specialized to domestic tasks, men usually bear the burden of the heavy, dirty, and dangerous jobs. They were the ones who hunted and fought wild animals. They provided the meat and (in the West) the field crops. To a greater degree than women, they dealt face to face with uncertainty. When confronted with scarcity, risk, and danger, men respond by trying to gain more control over their physical and social environments.

One man alone cannot achieve enough control over the hostile physical world or the other people in it, a fact that required men to organize themselves somehow. Democracy requires widespread education and wealth in order to function. Historically, men have been governed in some form of hierarchical government instead of democracy. In subsistence economies, there were only a few patriarchs or great men, but many slaves, servants, serfs, or peasants.

So for a man, life often comes down whether he will eat or be eaten; be master or slave, the boss or the grunt, conqueror or conquered. Men respond by seeking whatever control they can muster. A hostile, competitive environment requires aggression and dominance from the man who would be successful. Or, if circumstances dictate that a man cannot wield power himself, the ideals of patriarchy stress that he should at least limit how much other people control him. In such a world, male concern with competition and aggression, war and games of war, politics and power, money and trade, and analysis and logic was as natural an outgrowth of the economics of scarcity as woman's skill with the spindle.

Men may also find that on a subtle but very real level women demand this aggressive, macho behavior. A woman may not enjoy living with a dominant, competitive, emotionally insensitive man, but in many ways it is to her advantage to have such a man as her husband. Ambitious, aggressive men have an advantage over other men, and the wife of a dominant man shares his high status and privileges. Western culture today routinely criticizes men for their aggressive tendencies, but at the same time women find "bad boys" desirable. Ironically, the subordination of women is thus

partially a product of the feminine demand for a husband who is dominant and ambitious – a “real man.”

Marriage and Children

Under circumstances such as described above, “love” as a contemporary Westerner conceives of it is not necessarily part of marriage and family life. Historically, marriage was too much about production and business to be left to the vagaries of personal preference. Love and personal attraction were considered to be, if not irrelevant to a successful marriage, at least too flimsy a basis upon which to build such an important economic institution. When the hierarchical family prevails, marriages are arranged by families in order to further family interests.

Further, when household production is the main motive for childbearing and marriage and men hold the material resources, marriages might be polygynous (one man married to more than one woman) and there may be a significant age difference between the husband and wife, with girls marrying at young ages. The sexual double-standard will prevail, with men accorded sexual freedom regardless of marital status while women are expected to be virgins at marriage and faithful to their husband afterwards. Children are regarded mostly in their productive capacity, and a couple may have more children than they might prefer because they need the labor. Decisions about parental provision of health care, education, and items such as food and clothing to individual children will depend on their productive potential, which is inevitably determined by the child’s sex. For example, when any of these resources are in short supply, families allocate more of them to sons rather than daughters, as educating or feeding boys is a better investment

from a material point of view. In fact, in some societies, the expected return on girl children is so low that they might be aborted, given away, exposed or killed after birth.

The Industrial Revolution and the Transformation of the Family

The technological and economic developments that radically altered the sexual division of labor and created the new, “liberated” family began to take shape in the United States and Western Europe around the turn of the eighteenth century. Shortly after 1780, a man named Oliver Evans designed the world’s first partially automated flour mill. Prior to this development, the staple of most American farm households was maize, which individual households grew, ground, and baked at home as cornbread. Although most people prefer wheat to corn bread, wheat is a hard grain that had to be ground at a commercial mill. Moreover, because whole wheat contains the bran and the germ, it spoils quickly once it is ground, making it unwise to grind more than a small amount at a time. The frequent trips to a mill required by wheat made it too inconvenient and expensive for everyday use. Evan’s invention overcame these difficulties, inexpensively producing fine white flour, which kept well and was easily stored and transported. Soon it became more efficient for families to buy wheat flour (and eventually, ready-made white bread) than to grow their own corn.¹⁴

Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan shows how this and other technological developments, such as cheap canal transportation, efficient stoves both for cooking and for heating, and piped-in water, “industrialized the home,” freeing men and children from much of their traditional work.¹⁵ Note that these innovations are not “industrial” in our normal understanding of the word. Household heat and water were not produced on an

assembly line. But with these developments, more and more of the necessities of life – food, clothing, shelter, education – could be purchased more economically than they could be produced at home.

Dates by which production had left the household in the U.S. ¹⁶

- 1860 Butchering, textile making, leatherwork, milling
- 1880 Men's clothing
- 1900 Preservation of some foodstuffs, dairy products; drugs, medicine
- 1910 Biscuits, quick cereals
- 1920 Most family clothing
- 1930 Bread; long-term medical care

As industrialization continued, production taking place in the American household continued to diminish. Cowan writes, “During the nineteenth century, households ceased to manufacture cloth and began to buy it; they similarly ceased to manufacture candles and, instead, purchased kerosene; they ceased to chop wood and, instead, began to purchase coal.... There were a variety of reasons for these changes. Some once-rural, now-urban households found that many of these activities were not possible in an urban setting. Other households ceased carrying them on out of economic considerations, since the wages of the young or of parents were able to buy more goods or a higher standard of goods than any of these individuals could have produced by themselves.”¹⁷

Well before the middle of the twentieth century, households had ceased to be centers of production in the U.S. and in much of Western Europe. Certainly by mid-century, except for an occasional tomato plant or fruit tree, few urban or suburban

American households grew any of its own food. One of the first things that this changed was the daytime composition of the home. Cowan writes, “Virtually all of the stereotypically male household occupations were eliminated by technological and economic innovations during the nineteenth century, and many of those that had previously been allotted to children were gone as well.”¹⁸ No longer required at home, but needing cash to pay for these newly available conveniences, men increasingly spent most of their waking hours away from the household.

While technological change took men out of the home for much of the day, another member of the household – the servant – disappeared from it entirely. Cowan notes that all of the nineteenth century middle-class households she examined had some kind of paid household help, even if it was only a laundress who came in once or twice a week. In the U.S., except in wealthy households, paid help had greatly decreased and live-in help almost vanished by mid-twentieth century. “Modern technology,” Cowan observed, “enabled the American housewife of 1950 to produce singlehandedly what her counterpart of 1850 needed a staff of three or four to produce.”¹⁹ In addition, rising wage rates made full-time household help far too expensive for any but the wealthiest Americans. Few Americans can afford a housemaid or houseboy, for example, who are routinely found in middle- and upper-class households in Africa.

In the United States, into the early part of the twentieth century there continued to be a balance between the need for things that could be produced by one person working at home and the items that could be purchased by the income of one person working outside the home.²⁰ Marriage continued to make for a more pleasant life than that available to the typical single person of either sex, whose unmarried options consisted of

living with parents or in a boarding house, eating expensive or poor-quality meals out, living in a dirty home, sending out laundry or washing it in the sink, having no children, and doing without regular sex.²¹ With a husband-“provider,” a woman could quit her paid job (as very many did in this era, even before they had children) and create a comfortable – and thrifty – home for herself and her husband. These households were no doubt pressed for cash, but because production was still taking place at home, they could often get along without it.

Sometime in the middle of the twentieth century, however, American households passed a tipping-point in which the efforts of the one at home were reaching what economists call the point of “diminishing marginal returns” (that is, a situation in which a given amount of effort or resources produced fewer and fewer returns.) Within a few decades, the technology that made it possible for the 1950s housewife to do without servants was making it possible to consider doing without the housewife as well. Advances had made houses cleaner and ever more comfortable, maintained living spaces at just the right temperature, offered convenient prepared food, and presented a dazzling array of relatively inexpensive clothing and vastly improved methods of cleaning it – all with less time and effort than that put in by one 1950s housewife. Furthermore, the staggering availability of entertainment and what used to be considered luxury goods at enticingly affordable prices meant that American families increasingly needed two incomes from outside the home in order to consume at what came to be seen as a necessary level.

The Decline in the Value of Children

Just as industrialization relieved men of most of their household-related chores and eliminated household servants, it freed children as well. Moreover, with much of production now taking place outside the household, children needed different education and skills than they had been getting at home. Initially, demand for factory workers increased the demand for child labor. The 1870 census reported that about one in eight American children was formally employed. But although working class families were still dependent on children's wages, extensive public campaigns in the early part of the twentieth century resulted in the creation of laws outlawing child-labor and making education compulsory. By the 1930s even poor American children were in school and for the most part out of the productive labor market.²²

Here a truly significant change began to make itself felt: While children who help with the farm work or who bring home pay packets offer economic benefit to the family, children who contribute nothing financially and who have to be educated pose significant costs. In response, the movement of production out of the household triggered a dramatic decline in the birthrate in the United States and Europe. In 1800s fully one-quarter of American women aged 15-44 gave birth. The twentieth century high—26.6 live births per year per 1000 people in the population in 1947 – was only slightly more than a tenth of that, and as the century progress it declined further, reaching a low of 14.6 in 1998. Put another way, the average number of children borne by a woman dropped exponentially from 7.04 in 1800, to 3.56 in 1900, to slightly less than 2 in 2000.²³

**Percentage of Americans Employed in Agriculture and the Average Number of
Children Born by American Women, 1800, 1900, and 2002.**

• 1800	74%	7.04
• 1900	39%	3.56
• 2002	2%	< 2

If the traditional sexual division of labor was caused, as Becker suggests, by the compelling need for children along with the equally compelling need to continue to do productive labor, in the U.S. “tradition” was set to blow by mid-century.²⁴ Except for the increasingly rare family farm, home production of items for sale had ceased in the early part of the century. It is probably misleading to even speak of home production at this point, as a good deal of the work the housewife did by then was preparation for consumption rather than the creation of new products that could not be obtained otherwise – for example, cooking purchased food to put on the table rather than growing, preserving and selling it. Certainly the compelling need for children had disappeared.

As production moved out of the home, many of women's traditional functions – home cooking, cleaning house, vegetable gardening, preserving food, knitting, sewing, brewing beer, keeping a wood fire burning (“tending the hearth”), weaving, preparing medicines and even, ironically, childbearing — became luxuries or hobbies (in some cases, exotic and expensive ones) rather than necessities. As happened with the tasks performed by men and children, it became more economically efficient for women to earn cash to buy the necessities of life rather than try to produce them themselves.

Consequently housewives began to experience what writer and mother of the modern women's movement Betty Friedan called the "problem that has no name": a sense of restlessness and lack of fulfillment, the perception that traditional women's work was no longer valued, and that women needed to find something else to do.²⁵

Percentage of married American women employed outside the home

With children under the age of 17:

1950	12.6%
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1994	69%
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With children age 1 or under

1994	59%
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Women in the Household

In pre-industrial economies it may take up to two hours a day simply to prepare grain for cooking.²⁶ Today a quick trip to the corner supermarket and a few minutes at the microwave produces a perfectly edible and nutritious meal. Although housework still requires a non-trivial amount of time a week, most of it is no longer a matter of survival or even basic comfort, the way that chopping wood used to be. Restless at home fulltime, American women have joined the paid workforce in enormous numbers. Of all married mothers with children under seventeen, 12.6 % were in the paid workforce in 1950. In 1994, 69% were. In 1994, 58.8% of married women with children age one year and under were working outside the home. In 1973, 53% of married couples were "traditional," with an employed husband, a housekeeping wife, and children. In 1998,

this percentage had dropped to 21%. Conversely, in 1972, 32% of married couples were both employed. In 1998, 59% were.

Preparation time for Cream of Wheat Cereal

In 1893	15 minutes
In 1939	5 minutes
In 2006	30 seconds ²⁷

Although the women's movement or feminism has been blamed for the breakdown of the family, when the problem of family change is looked at as a response to economic change, it becomes apparent this explanation has cause and effect reversed. Feminism did not cause the decline in the traditional family. Rather, the breakdown of the traditional economic function of the family caused feminism.

Singleness

According to economists, marriage continues to offer economic advantages compared to singleness, including a pooling of risk (if one person becomes unemployed, the other can still provide) and economies of scale (one large apartment costs less than two small apartments). Economists also note that, "The long-term horizon implied by marriage gives each of the spouses the ability to neglect some skills and focus on the development of others."²⁸ Nonetheless, people increasingly find singleness not only possible but preferable. For example, one researcher found that increasing numbers of high achieving women say that having a man around the house adds to their workload rather than diminishing it.²⁹ Social commentators have remarked that "women who want children do not need or necessarily want a spouse underfoot," and that, "Children are a joy; many men are not."³⁰ "When I've ended a relationship," said one woman, "I've

found myself realizing that although being single is a lonelier life, it's a much easier one. I think that's a secret that the culture tries to keep: If you can pay the rent and afford to go out and have fun, single life is pretty easy.”³¹

For men, too, a spouse is a mixed blessing. The modern working wife brings in extra income, but her employment means that a lot of domestic tasks either don't get done or require the husband to do them. Married men whose wives are not employed make more money and receive more promotions than single men.³² On the other hand, men are increasingly coming to resent the burden of supporting a family single-handedly. “Imagine volunteering for a lifestyle that forces you to give up nearly half your household income, sell your toys, forgo vacations of the kind your friends enjoy, and work as if three or four lives depended on your next paycheck.” This, opens a Wall Street Journal article, is the “world of many solo-breadwinner dads.”³³ Economically, the variables appear to be increasingly tipping in favor of singleness: The age at marriage in the U.S. has climbed to 25 years for women and 27 for men. For those with a college-education, the figures are two years higher. This “age at marriage” statistic captures only those who actually marry, however. In 2002, 28% of the U.S. population between the ages of 30 and 34 was never married, as were 18% of those between the ages of 35 and 39.³⁴ Twenty six percent of the population lives in a household with only one person in it.³⁵ In 1947, married couples made up 78% of the households. In 2002, married-couple households had dropped to 52%.

Divorce

When households were centers of production, the things that the husband and wife created required the efforts of them both. The most important product was children,

who in turn provided things needed both for immediate survival and served as insurance against future need, especially care for parents in old age. Married couples in the past were effectively co-owners of the same business, and few of these businesses could survive division or the loss of one partner (which is why widows and widowers sought to remarry).³⁶ Historically, the marriage contract -- which Becker suggests exists in virtually every culture to provide legal and financial protection for the woman in her role as child bearer -- specified the damages owed in case of dissolution so that the men would not be tempted to replace his wife as she aged and became less productive.³⁷ This mutual dependence added great stability to marriage. Couples might or might not have been happy, but they stayed together.

Today, couples are likely to have independent careers and produce little together besides children, who have no economic value. Further, their marital goods are relatively easy to divide: A divorcing couple can divvy up the private pension plan funds, draw government pensions and health benefits individually, acquire new furnishings, feed and clothe themselves, etc. Neither man nor woman needs a spouse or children to provide care in sickness or old age. Whether or not to remain in a marriage became entirely up to each individual.

In consequence, in much of the world today marriage depends not, as it did in the past, on sexual complementarity but almost entirely on the emotions of the two parties to it. Sexual attraction and romantic love, once considered too fragile to sustain marriage, have instead become its sole criterion. Most Americans regard entering into marriage without sexual attraction, or to derive a financial benefit, as foolish or immoral. The payment of dowries or bride price is similarly simply inconceivable and regarded as

oppressive by the modern American or Western European. The decreasing need for sexual complementarity also explains why homosexual behavior has become increasingly more acceptable. Two men's desire to marry each others makes no sense at all when the purpose of marriage is to protect women in their childbearing capacity. When the basis of marriage is sexual attraction, however, and that attraction is for the same sex, what was once unthinkable begins to be questioned. Unfortunately, the flip side of marrying for love is that when love or attraction leaves the relationship, people begin wondering if they "owe it to themselves" to end the marriage. Not surprisingly, for this and other reasons, American divorce rates began to rise in the late 60s/early 70s. Of all American adults who had ever been married, the percentage that had also been divorced doubled from 17% in 1972 to 33-34% in 1996/98.³⁸ In 1972, 73% of the children in the United States were being reared by two parents in an uninterrupted marriage. By 1996, this number had dropped to 49%. An analysis of 1985 census data showed that among recent first marriages, the divorce rates was 67%.³⁹

"Love" and consumption

As the Industrial Revolution eliminated the economic need for children, many of the *natural* reasons for the sacrifices and commitments marriage entailed vanished. In a subsistence economy, a man wants children not because he loves kids but because he needs loyal and obedient workers whose own comfort and survival depend on his. He needs a sexually-complementary partner to produce those children and the other domestic goods made by women. He had to make a legally-binding contract with a woman in order to assure her and her family that she would not be discarded or replaced once she

had given him those children. Women, in turn, accepted their role in traditional family life because, whatever its disadvantages, it remained the only practical way to live.

In the Western world today, rearing children poses significant costs, especially in parental time which might otherwise be spent in more pleasurable or income-producing activities. The payback to childrearing, like marriage, is only emotional (and sometimes the emotions that go with childrearing are not so pleasant). Children are no longer items of production but of consumption. Becker notes a shift from the demand for quantity of children to quality of children (that is, people have fewer children but invest more time and resources into making each one highly educated, accomplished, etc.), a shift which requires even more parental investment in the child. Like home cooking or hand knitting, children ceased to be necessities and became instead expensive luxuries, and one that many men and women today find they can live without. In the developed world, the economic need for children has ceased to be a reason for marriage.

In an economy of scarcity, sexuality, for all the fringe benefits it offers, is just another tool of production. In the new world of wealth, sex is uncoupled from reproduction and becomes an item of consumption that can be enjoyed for its own sake. In fact, since one of the things that people most want to consume is sex, restraint appeared to be counter-productive to the new cultural order. Since marriage no longer plays a role in production, the need for feminine sexual restraint outside of marriage, so intimately a part of the marriage contract, has also vanished. Marriage no longer has enough economic importance to warrant the extensive policing and restrictions that were once used to enforce female virginity before marriage. Norms controlling sexual behavior

have eroded to such an extent in the United States and Europe that attempts to encourage pre-marital chastity may be met with name-calling and derision.

Sexual behavior will therefore have different meaning in developed vs. developing countries, a fact that sheds light on the conflict among various agencies attempting to prevent AIDS and HIV infection in Africa. Approaching this life-or-death problem with modern Western beliefs about sexuality, most Western agencies see condom distribution and education as key and regard programs advocating sexual restraint (such as the “Abstinence” and “Be faithful” portions of Uganda’s ABC program) as inappropriately religious and moralistic. But as AIDS researcher Edward Green observes, Africa has never had a “sexual revolution.”⁴⁰ Girls and women in many parts of Africa are still under pressure to remain virgins in order to contract a good marriage (and a good bride price). When African women engage in sex outside of marriage they are very likely not, as a Westerner might expect, to be enjoying the modern “sexual prerogatives” of an American college student. Rather, sex outside of marriage in Africa is more likely to follow the historic pattern of women providing sex in exchange for resources from older men.⁴¹ (Paul Theroux, in his African travelogue *Dark Star Safari*, notes that the three teenage prostitutes who offered him their sexual services in Kampala, Uganda were happy to be treated to a meal of fried potatoes instead.⁴²) In traditional economies where cash and jobs are scarce, and where families may refuse to invest what few resources they have in daughters, girls may work as occasional prostitutes in order to get money to pay for their school fees. The same economic problems generate male demand for these girls’ services: men may not be able to afford marriage until in their late 20s or early 30s, and even then paid employment may require long separations from

their wives. The issue of AIDS prevention in Africa is not so much one of chastity vs. condoms as it is of that traditional patriarchy and coping with poverty.

Production or consumption?

The astonishing wealth of the developed world in the twentieth and twenty first centuries has freed most people from concerns about survival. Households have been transformed from the locus of production to the locus of consumption. But treating people as items intended to satisfy one's own desire to consume is no less material, and perhaps nearly as damaging to the other person, as treating them as tools of production. The anxieties suffered by people today relate less to getting enough to eat than to consuming at a high enough level. In surveys, many American children say that their goal in life is to be rich. For example, consumer expert Juliet B. Schor writes that nearly two thirds of the parents in her survey agree that, "My child defines his or her self-worth in terms of the things they own and wear more than I did when I was that age." "American children are deeply enmeshed in the culture of getting and spending, and they are getting more so," she writes. "The more they buy into the commercial and materialist messages, the worse they feel about themselves, the more depressed they are, and the more they are beset by anxiety, headaches, stomachaches, and boredom."⁴³

Problems and Solutions

The two kinds of family I have discussed here – patriarchal versus liberated – are different in many ways. In one way, however, they are very similar: They both encourage the individuals within the family to treat each other like objects. This is more obvious, perhaps, in patriarchy than in the newer, liberated family. The fact that the

Western family does not have to deal with poverty means that there will be less overt abuse than there might be in a family that requires much labor just to survive. In fact, some American children feel smothered by their parents' loving attention. Nonetheless, we need to look carefully beyond the cloak of "love language" that covers many of the Western pronouncements about marriage and family. When "love" means caring concern for a spouse or a child, we are on the right path. But materialism too often results in a more dangerous meaning for the word "love". This kind of "love" is all about what you can do for me. And when I love another person the same way I love my new car, my cow, my stereo system, then I am using people like objects.

The twentieth century's journey from historic to modern families demonstrates that there are no economic solutions to problems that are themselves created by material forces. The only real solutions to family and marital problems are moral and spiritual ones. Fortunately, history also shows that it is possible for moral and spiritual teachings to conquer material, economic imperatives. The history of Christianity's impact on family practices offers one such example. In its origins in the first century, even as a small and suspect sect, Christianity had a major impact on the ancient Roman patriarchy in which it was embedded. In time, it succeeded in eliminating many of patriarchy's abuses of the family. Christian teachings forbade infanticide and abortion, both common Roman practices. It raised the age of marriage for girls from age 14 and younger, as was the earlier custom, to age 18 or older.⁴⁴ Unlike Roman culture, Christianity required chastity of men as well as women, outlawed polygamy, opposed and ultimately eliminated slavery, put slaves and women into leadership positions in the church, allowed marital separation in the interest of peace but discouraged divorce, and encouraged

people – including young girls -- to remain single if they so chose.⁴⁵ Christian widows were encouraged to remain unmarried if they wished and were given financial support so that they did not have to remarry for financial support. A significant factor in the explosive growth of the early Christian movement was that it treated women so well (a fact that is given thorough treatment in Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*.)⁴⁶ Turn-of-the-twentieth century theologian Shailer Matthews sums up the impact of Christianity on the natural world, writing that the times and place where people “have come most under the influence of the words and life of Jesus have been those in which institutions at variance with fraternity; branding, polygamy, the exposure of children, slavery, drunkenness and licentiousness—have disappeared.”⁴⁷ Similarly, Rodney Stark's last few books have documented the enormous beneficial impact of the Christian teachings on those cultures that have adopted them.⁴⁸

And how did Christianity do this in its early days? By endorsing, over and over again, an ethic of self-sacrificial caring for other people – for our spouse, for our children, for our friends, for our neighbor, even when the neighbor is someone from an alien, perhaps hostile, tribe. Christianity did this by insisting on this caring, self-sacrificing love despite the material imperative and the riches the world offers to those who serve themselves.

While Christianity has been effective in overcoming patriarchy, Judaism and Islam also urge that individuals and society care for the powerless, the poor, the widows, the orphans, the fatherless: principles that, if followed, would make dramatic changes in the way we behave towards each other. Marriage and family are the occasions for great joy and the possibilities of real love – caring concern for other people – are endless. So I

urge that as Uganda makes this difficult transition from poverty to wealth, you insist that your laws and beliefs and practices and customs reflect a commitment to each other, not as objects, but as human beings, each of whom is precious in God's sight.

¹ Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981. Enlarged edition, 1993.

² Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*. Basic Books, 1983, p. 32.

³ In a great many societies, such as in much of Asia, couples did not go out on their own but joined their relatives' pre-existing extended household.

⁴ Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998, p. 64.

⁵ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 101.

⁶ Becker, 1993, p. 38 and generally all of chapter 2, "Division of Labor in Households and Families."

⁷ That is, until around 1800 when looms became heavy pieces of equipment that were rented for limited periods of time – then men did the weaving.

⁸ Ruth Bleier, *Science and Gender: A Critique of Biology and Its Theories on Women*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1984. Becker, 43n.

⁹ Jill Kerr Conway, *True North*, New York: Borzoi Books, 1994, p. 234.

¹⁰ Cowan, p. 165, 170.

¹¹ Even sexual dimorphism, the tendency for males of many species to be bigger than females, makes better sense when seen in terms of feminine rather than masculine needs. Men are not larger than women are because they need to be stronger to protect them; women are smaller than men in order to preserve scarce calories for the requirements of pregnancy and nursing (rather than to support body mass.)

¹² Becker, p. 40.

¹³ Margaret F. Brinig and Douglas W. Allen, “‘These Boots Are Made for Walking’: Why Most Divorce Filers Are Women,” *American Law and Economics Association*, 2000, 126-169. This line of reasoning is analogous to economic analyses of “firm-specific” versus general human capital.

¹⁴ Ruth Schwatz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 49.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 78.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.41-42

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 64

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 100.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 100

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 67.

²² Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 6.

²³ Cowan, p. 43, and U.S. Census Bureau, “Population Profile of the United States: 2000” Internet version. <http://www.census.gov/population/pop-profile/2000/chap04.pdf>.

Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan’s fascinating history of the impact of the Industrial Revolution makes much of the fact that it was the tasks performed by men and children that were the first to leave the economically productive household. Why, she asks, was it not women’s work that left the home? Why do we not find neighborhood communal kitchens and men at home doing smithy work in the backyard? Her book, *More Work for Mother*, was published in 1983 without benefit of economist Gary S. Becker’s explanation for the sexual division of labor. Without it, Cowan can only guess that women’s traditional work was the last to be “industrialized” because that pattern fit with nineteenth century social conventions. Within the framework of Becker’s model, however, we see that the “women’s work” that stayed in the home – cooking, cleaning, infant care, caring for sick children – and those that left the home and came back again, such as laundry, remained women’s work because, first, nineteenth, and twentieth century, these were still the tasks that were compatible with child bearing. Granted, late twentieth century couples were having far fewer children, but as long as they were having any at all, and as long as women were the ones who bore them, the physical demands of pregnancy, recovery from childbirth, and breastfeeding (not to mention the strong physical bond that most women feel towards their newborns) continue to dictate that women continue to be the ones at home with their children. And as long as you are at

home, it is probably easier and certainly less expensive to do the laundry, cleaning, and cooking yourself rather than “outsource” them. From personal experience, I found that housekeeping was just about the only work I could do with young children at home. Combining childcare with work requiring extended concentration (in my case, writing, scholarly research, class preparation) or quiet (making phone calls) can be very difficult.

²⁴ The social and moral upheavals of the 1960s should not be considered as discrete events but rather as a continuation of trends in family life and sexuality well underway for decades but interrupted by the Great Depression, World War II and the reactive, but temporary, return to domesticity that characterized the end of both the Depression and the war in the 1950s.

²⁵ Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*, London: Penguin Books, 1963.

²⁶ Carol A. Newson and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 247.

²⁷ “Hidden in Plain View: Ticking Away,” *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2006, A2.

²⁸ Linda J. Waite and Evelyn L. Lehrer, “The Benefits from Marriage and Religion in the United States: A Comparative Analysis,” *Population and Development Review* 29 (2): 255-275 (June 2003).

²⁹ Sylvia Ann Hewitt, *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children*. New York: Talk Miramax Books, 2002, p. 143.

³⁰ Caryn James, “A Baby Boom on TV as Biological Clocks Cruelly Tick Away,” *New York Times*, October 16, 1991, C-15. Katha Pollitt, “Bothered and Bewildered,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1993. Quoted in Blankenhorn, p. 76, 77.

³¹ Peggy Orenstein, *Flux: Women on sex, work, love, kids, and life in a half-changed world*. New York: Doubleday, 2000, p. 99.

³² Waite and Lehrer, p. 258.

³³ Sue Shellenbarger, “The Sole Breadwinner’s Lament: Having Mom at Home Isn’t as Great as It Sounds.” *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2003.

³⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2003*, table no. 63.

³⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *USA Statistics in Brief—Population and Vital Statistics*.

³⁶ Cowen, p. 25.

³⁷ Becker, pp. 30-31. Because the joint household products were usually held in the man’s name, an old man remained a viable candidate for remarriage in a way a divorced old woman did not.

³⁸ Tom Smith, “The Emerging 21st Century American Family,” National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, November 24, 1999, pp. 1-2. Smith noted, “The 33-34% level is lower than the commonly cited figure that ‘half of all marriages end in divorce.’ The latter is a projection of how many married people will *eventually* divorce.”

³⁹ 1989 study of US Census records, researchers at the University of Wisconsin. Cited (without further reference) in John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail...and How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1994

⁴⁰ Edward C. Green, *Rethinking AIDS Prevention: Learning from Successes in Developing Countries*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003.

⁴¹ Green, Introduction; Medad Birungi, personal correspondence, December 2005.

⁴² Paul Theroux, *Dark Star Safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town*. Mariner Books,

2004.

⁴³ Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*, Scribner, 2004. Cited in Michelle Singletary, "The Color of Money," *Washington Post*, Nov 14, 2004.

⁴⁴ Stark, p. 105.

⁴⁵ Rodney Stark, p. 104. A proper appreciation of the early Christian view of marriage must begin by contrasting it with the corrupt family practices of the culture in which it was embedded. Within that culture, Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7 that a person, especially a woman, did not have to marry was both revolutionary and liberating.

⁴⁶ Nonetheless, because Christianity remained embedded in a subsistence, household production-based economy, the sexual division of labor continued. Thus, while Christianity transformed the family in the Christianized societies, its radical message undermining ancient patriarchy was to some extent lost. Ironically, New Testament writings urging husbands/fathers/masters to stop striving for their own benefits at the expense of other people (to serve their servants, to sacrifice their own will in order to care for their wives, and to use their children's obedience not for their own economic purposes but to lead their children to Christ in Ephesians 5 -6) were taken out of context to support slavery and the subordination of women.

⁴⁷ Shailer Matthews, *The Social Teachings of Jesus, as Essay in Christian Sociology*. New York, MacMillian, 1897, pp. 191-197.

⁴⁸ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God : How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press,

2004. *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Lead to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*. New York: Random House, 2005.