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CONTEMPORARY MARRIAGE: FULFILLING AND FRAGILE

*Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered
Marriage* by Stephanie Coontz (Viking, 2005)

A Book Review By David Hennessee

In recent years, the hot-button issue of gay marriage has provoked an anxious rear-guard defense of so-called “traditional” marriage. Airwaves, editorial pages, and State-of-the-Union addresses ring with catch-phrases defining marriage. We are informed that “marriage is a sacred institution”—never mind that pesky wall between Church and State. “Natural marriage” is touted as “the foundation of civilization,” and politicians of all stripes repeat the vote-getting phrase: “I believe that marriage is between a man and a woman.”

The terms of this debate exasperate anyone who knows the first thing about the history of human pair-bonding. The modern Western ideal of marriage is not in any sense “traditional,” or “natural, or (for most) “sacred.” Generally, we ask that marriage be a union of equals founded on mutual compatibility, respect, sexual fidelity, and love. This model bears little resemblance to any form of marriage practiced anywhere, at any time in history. All the better, as the contemporary ideal promises greater emotional fulfillment and happiness than any prior form of marriage. However, because we base marriages on feelings, they are also more fragile than any in the past.

So argues Stephanie Coontz in her important and fascinating new history of marriage. For most of human history, marriage was not founded on love. Of course, people have always fallen in love, but love was usually considered a rare and fortunate side effect in marriage. Instead, marriage served primarily to secure political and economic advantages, usually through forming “kinship alliances” with other families. Legitimate

procreation was vital because it provided a supply of marriageable children (future alliance-builders), and it also increased the family's labor force—vital in agricultural and cottage-industry economies. Until fairly recently, these considerations far outweighed love in marriage, as did others: civic obligations, religious observances, duties to parents, siblings, and children. In fact, married couples were often exhorted to reign in their personal feelings so that the practical advantages of their match would come first.¹ For example, an 18th century Dr. Phil-type argued that marriage did not exist “for men and women to be always taken up with each other.” Rather, marriage helped them “to discharge the duties of civil society, to govern their families with prudence and to educate their children with discretion.”²

According to Coontz, everything changed in the 18th century. The Enlightenment gave unprecedented emphasis to individual liberty and the “pursuit of happiness.” Market capitalism made each man into an atomized economic unit, less dependent on family connections and a family work force. People were therefore free to follow their hearts to a degree never before possible. The new love-based marriage was sentimentalized in the 19th century and sexualized in the 20th. It reached its apotheosis in the 1950s male-breadwinner marriage: an arrangement that promptly fell apart, assaulted by second-wave feminism and 1970s economic pressures.


Coontz's impressively documented history is divided into four parts. Part One outlines the thesis and also provides an intriguing discussion of pair-bonding among pre-historic humans. Part Two, “The Era of Political Marriage” spans the ancient world to the 18th century. Part Three details the rise of the love match, Victorian sanctification of domesticity, and various 20th century developments that led to the 1950s “Ozzie and Harriet” ideal. Part Four, “Courting Disaster,” explains the decline of this model and consequences for public policy and individual happiness.

It is highly satisfying to read a comprehensive history that tracks its thesis so coherently. Moreover, this book contains a wealth of interesting and often bizarre historical details. A few examples:

- The Na people (30,000 strong in southwestern China) have no institution of marriage. Instead, siblings cohabit, pool resources, and raise the children born to sisters. Procreation occurs through casual sexual encounters with outsiders, and the parties involved have no additional obligations to each other.³
- To strengthen ties between families, some people in China and Sudan practice “ghost marriages” involving one living and one dead partner.⁴
- In 16th century London, wife beating was prohibited after 9PM, because the noise would disturb sleepers.⁵
- In the 1950s, two-thirds of women who began college dropped out, most to get married.⁶
- In 1960, only 10% of American women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine were single. By 1998, this figure had risen to 40%.⁷

Coontz's book does have certain weaknesses. She focuses primarily on marriage in the West, and justifies this emphasis by saying that the love-match is increasingly on the rise in the developing world. I would have liked more discussion of this transition. Some coverage of marriage in the Muslim world would have been particularly timely. As a 19th century specialist, I found Coontz's discussion of that period to be competent. However, in a work this wide-ranging, there are bound to be errors and oversimplifications. For example, referring to English philosopher "John Stuart Mills" is an inexcusable editorial lapse.⁸ More importantly, Coontz gives too much credence to the Victorian doctrine of women's "passionlessness," which held that women were largely devoid of sexual desire.⁹ Much recent work has debunked this idea, showing it to be but one theory among many regarding female sexuality.¹⁰ In fact, some Victorians thought female orgasm necessary for conception. Hence, many Victorian ladies' squeamishness and guilt about sex came not from "passionlessness" or fabled Victorian prudery, but from anxiety about getting pregnant.¹¹

Specialists may find this book a bit cursory, but most readers will be illuminated and intrigued. The writing is invariably clear, occasionally witty and impassioned. Personally, I was struck by one clear implication of Coontz's argument: the movement toward legalizing gay marriage is not an historical aberration, but a logical development in the evolution of marriage. If marriage no longer works mainly to establish family alliances, secure economic security, or produce children for the family workforce, but instead to nurture emotional intimacy, and if homosexuality has been de-criminalized, de-pathologized, and de-stigmatized, then why shouldn't gays and lesbians be allowed to marry?

Coontz ends her study by quoting women's diaries from the last 400 years. In reading these she has noticed "how often entries focused not on the joy of... marriages but on wives' struggle to accept their lot."¹² Phrases reiterated include "the cross I have to bear," "be more grateful for what I have," "give me strength," "help me not to provoke him," "give me patience."¹³ Modern wives – husbands too – are less constrained to put up with bad marriages. If both partners are economically self-sufficient, they have a range of options if their love falters. They can identify the factors troubling their marriage, read self-help books, go to counseling, and possibly strengthen their bond. Or they can try these remedies, see them as futile, give up, leave, and pursue personal fulfillment in some more effective way. Or they can just leave. Thus the paradox of modern marriage: the very emphasis on love that makes it far more fulfilling than ever, also makes it far more fragile. 

Notes

1. Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 16.
2. Coontz 150.
3. Coontz 32-33.
4. Coontz 27.
5. Coontz 121.
6. Coontz 236.
7. Coontz 264.
8. Coontz 181.
9. See Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology," *Signs* 4.2 (1978): 219-236.
10. See, for example, Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
11. James Eli Adams, "Victorian Sexualities," in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 131-132.
12. Coontz 312.
13. Coontz 312.

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