Sometimes a Great Notion: Panning for Gold in “The President’s Marriage Agenda for the Forgotten Sixty Percent”

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While much of the nation’s attention has been focused on whether same-sex couples should be permitted to marry,[1] the authors of “The President’s Marriage Agenda for the Forgotten Sixty Percent” are keening in a cobwebbed corner of the public square, trying to get someone to care about the “rapid decline of marriage among the almost sixty percent of the nation who are high school educated but not college educated….”

But we should care, and not because of some abstract commitment to the ideal of lifelong commitment that marriage (sort of) still represents. As well as we can ever know anything from social science research, we know this: Kids do best in stable, two-parent homes. To be reductive about the matter, divorce, out-of-wedlock parenting, and cohabitation are generally not conducive to good outcomes for children. Marriage Agenda cites one estimate of a national cost to taxpayers of more than $1 trillion per decade arising from the failure of stable families to form. I’m skeptical of this quantification, but less so of the squishier conclusion that this lack of home stability creates a loss of social opportunity. And as the decline of marriage has exploded into the middle class, the disruptive effects are more worrisome than ever.

To say that these broad conclusions are correct, though, isn’t to concede that they’re either complete or unproblematic. As I mentioned above, they’re reductive. The report doesn’t do much to distinguish the risks and poor outcomes associated with the three quite distinct phenomena it identifies: Divorce, out-of-wedlock parenting, and cohabitation. For example, in one compelling footnote that begged for (but didn’t get) more attention, the authors quote at length from a study that showed the lack of martial stability among poorly and moderately educated women exhibited different characteristics along racial lines: while white couples were likelier to have had multiple marriages, African-Americans were likeliest to never have married at all. These are quite different kinds of instability, and good public health practice requires attention to these differences in marriage-promotion policy. And not all cohabitation is equally risky. For instance, couples who are engaged when cohabitation begins are likelier to stay together than those who are not.

There’s a bigger problem, too. Only so much can be accomplished by targeting marriage, rather than the broader society in which marriage is breaking down. The decline of marriage is both the problem and a symptom of larger upheavals in our social, economic, and civil society. To an
extent, marriage is wobbling because families are contained within these broader systems that are losing altitude. Tackling marriage, all by itself, can be expected to have limited effect. The authors acknowledge the middle class’s downward spiral, but then pivot to discuss marriage.

That’s not to say the focus on marriage can have no effect. And the best of the ten recommendations at least implicitly try to address some of these broader issues. Recommendation 3 is to **Help Young Men Become Marriageable Men.** Subsumed within it are three suggestions, the first of which is the most compelling of the whole lot: Apprenticeships. The authors note that apprenticing is “widely used” outside the U.S., and that, through these kinds of supervised, work-based learning experiences, young men gain skills, learn responsibility, and reap personal, developmental benefits.[2]

Oddly, though, they don’t suggest this kind of training for another arena where they see potential for marriage-positive intervention: the prison population. There, they focus on educating non-violent prisoners on relationship-building skills. But if these same young men – largely uneducated and unskilled – don’t have decent job prospects awaiting them when they emerge from prison, these efforts will be largely a waste of resources. That conclusion is bolstered by data from the separate piece contained within the larger report, *Marriage and Relationship Education: A Promising Strategy for Strengthening Low-Income, Vulnerable Families.* It seems to me that the title is belied by the very evidence that the authors discuss. For the low-income families, the program either found no significant improvement on “relationship skills and satisfaction”, or (for African-American couples) “small but significant positive…effects” that largely disappeared after three years. I don’t hold out much hope that relationship education *simpliciter* can accomplish much of anything. It’s building too small a part of human capital.

As for the other recommendations, I’d place them into three categories:

- **Potentially useful in a limited way:** Removing tax disincentives for poor people to marry (Recommendation Number 1) is a good idea. So is intervention to prevent divorce (in appropriate cases) (Number 5),[3] and requiring premarital counseling for persons forming stepfamilies (Number 6) – although I don’t see a compelling reason for not requiring such counseling of all couples, pre-marriage, as long as it’s reasonable and evidence-based.
- **In a minor key:** (Number 8), *Engage Hollywood,* is all of one sentence (and not even a long one by Henry James’s standards). And (Number 10), *Find Your Marriage Voice,* seems designed more as a summary of the authors’ principal points, directed at the believers, than as a policy recommendation.
- **Counterproductive or plain out of place:** The idea of **Tripling the Child Tax Credit** (Number 2) in order to increase the proportion of kids in married families is just plain bizarre. If the problem is that not enough people are marrying, it seems that tripling the tax credit will just encourage more folks to have kids – whether they’re married or not. And the recommendation that we **End Anonymous Fatherhood** (Number 4) by banning anonymous sperm donation wandered in from another debate.

The title of the report is a misnomer. This isn’t “The President’s Marriage Agenda,” but that of the essay’s well-credentialed and thoughtful authors. It should be called “What We Think The
President’s Marriage Agenda Should Be,” but of course they’re trying to convey the urgency of their views and recommendations. A more targeted approach would have been more effective, but at least they’re trying.

[1] Yes.

[2] My first reaction to any such suggestion would ordinarily be: “But what about young women?” I didn’t read the recommendation as excluding women, though, but as a way of focusing on a group that’s increasingly missing from the marriage pool. So it was only about my fourth reaction.

[3] The suggestion that couples wait a year before divorce, though, is a singularly bad idea, especially if it’s not equipped with exceptions for cases involving abusive or otherwise destructive relationships. Counseling, good. Forcing people who hate each other to continue living under the same roof, bad.