

Family Reunion

The case against the case against gay marriage.

THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE BY DAVID BLANKENHORN • ENCOUNTER BOOKS
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hen I came out with a book making the case for same-sex marriage a few years ago, I expected to spend time selling gay marriage to straight people and marriage to gay people. The surprise was how much time I spent selling marriage to straight people.

By marriage, I mean not just a commitment that two people make to each other. Marriage is a commitment that the two spouses also make to their community. They promise to look after each other and their children so society won't have to; in exchange, society deems them a family and provides an assortment of privileges, obligations, and caregiving tools. (Not, mostly, "benefits.") Marriage does much more than ratify relationships, I would tell audiences; it fortifies relationships by embedding them in a dense web of social expectations. That is why marriage, with or without children, is a win-win deal, strengthening individuals,

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families, and communities all at the same time. Gay marriage, I said, would be the same positive-sum transaction. The example gay couples set by marrying instead of shacking up might even strengthen marriage itself.

Audiences received my gay-marriage pitch in predictably varied ways. What consistently surprised me, however, was how few people thought of marriage as anything more than a private contract. Particularly among groups of younger people, the standard view was that marriage is just an individual lifestyle choice. If chosen, great. If not chosen, great. I would leave such encounters with a troubling thought: Perhaps straights were becoming receptive to gay marriage partly because they had devalued marriage itself.

In his new book, *The Future of Marriage*, David Blankenhorn begins where my doubts left off. Blankenhorn is the founder and president of his own think tank, the Institute for American Values, and has built his career on the restoration of fatherhood to the center of American family life. In *The Future of Marriage*, he emerges as an articulate, humane, and fair-minded opponent of same-sex marriage, which he regards as nothing less than part of an effort to steal children's patrimony. "It would require us, legally and formally, to withdraw marriage's greatest promise to the child—the promise that, insofar as society can make it possible, I will be loved and raised by the mother and father who made me." He takes jabs at me, among other gay-marriage advocates, but in my case he plays fair. And Blankenhorn is ambitious. He wants to lift the gay-marriage debate from its isolation in the mud-pit of the partisan culture wars and place it within a larger theory of marriage. He also wants to put an end to the days when gay-marriage advocates can say that there is no serious case against gay marriage. In both respects, he succeeds.

As I read, I made note of points on which he and I agree. I soon found myself running out of paper. Marriage, we both believe, is a vital institution, not just equal to competing family arrangements from society's point of view but preferable; it is an institution embedded in society, not a mere contract between individuals; it is social, not just legal, and so cannot be twisted like a pretzel by court order; it has (almost) everywhere and always been heterosexual and entwined with procreation, and should be. Gay marriage, we both believe, is a significant change that entails risk (though we assess the risks very differently); but gay marriage, we also believe, is a supporting character in the much larger drama of shifting social values. We agree that heterosexuals, not homosexuals, will determine marriage's fate and have handled matrimony pretty poorly without any gay help. And we agree that children, on average (please note the qualifier), do best when raised by their biological mother and father, though he makes more sweeping claims on that score than I would. That is a great deal of

common ground, which makes it all the more interesting that we come out in utterly different places and that gay marriage, in some ways, turns out to be the least of our disagreements.

For Blankenhorn, “the most important trend affecting marriage in America” is not same-sex marriage. It is the “deinstitutionalization” of marriage—that is, “the belief that marriage is exclusively a private relationship”—of which gay marriage is merely a prominent offshoot. To his credit, he understands and forthrightly acknowledges that the individualistic view of marriage “has deep roots in our society and has been growing for decades, propagated overwhelmingly by heterosexuals.”

Marriage creates kin. In society’s eyes, it distinguishes a relationship from a family. The trouble, for Blankenhorn, with declaring any old kind of relationship a family—with turning marriage into “a pretty label for a private relationship”—is that marriage evolved and exists for a specific social reason, which is to bind both parents, especially fathers, to their biological children. Same-sex marriage, he argues, denies this principle, because its “deep logic” is that a family is whatever we say it is, and it changes the meaning of marriage “for *everyone*” (his italics). For support, he draws on the writings of left-wing activists and academics who favor same-sex marriage precisely because, they hope, it would knock mom-dad-child marriage off its pedestal. Granting marriage rights to gay couples, who even in principle cannot unite biological fathers and mothers with their children, would “require us in both law and culture to deny the double origin of the child.” Once that happens, we “transform marriage once and for all from a pro-child social institution into a post-institutional private relationship.”

In plainer English, Blankenhorn is saying that marriage is designed to discriminate in favor of conjugal families and must continue to do so. Egalitarians may hate that idea, but it isn’t stupid or bigoted. Blankenhorn is correct to think society has a strong interest in keeping fathers, mothers, and children together; many of today’s problems of crime, poverty, and inequality flow directly from the breakdown of families. But there Blankenhorn and I part ways. He says he is all for maintaining the dignity and equality of gay people, but he believes that changing marriage’s most venerable boundary is the wrong way to do so. I am all for maintaining the strength of marriage and family, but I think that telling homosexuals (and their kids) they can’t form legal families is the wrong way to do so.

Having written a whole book on the subject, I won’t rehearse here why I think gay marriage is good family policy. Suffice it to say that, in a society riddled with

divorce and fatherlessness, family policy's essential task is to shore up marriage's status as a norm. In a world where gay couples look married, act married, talk married, raise kids together, and are increasingly accepted as married, the best way to preserve marriage's normative status is to bring gay couples inside the tent. Failing to do so, over time, will tar marriage as discriminatory, legitimize co-habitation and other kinds of non-marriage, and turn every successful gay couple into a cultural advertisement for the expendability of matrimony.

Blankenhorn clearly disagrees. Our disagreement over how gay marriage will affect marriage's normative status, however, is well-plowed ground. So I'll move along to what Blankenhorn rightly considers his deeper and more important arguments, which are about the nature of marriage itself. Near the beginning of his book, Blankenhorn calls childrearing (by which he means the rearing of children by their biological parents) "probably the single most important social need that marriage is designed to meet, but there are numerous others as well." Two pages later, however, he makes a more unequivocal statement: "Without children, marriage as an institution makes little sense." Though he regularly uses qualifiers, it quickly becomes clear that, in practice, the unqualified statement is much closer to his view.

Blankenhorn succeeds in showing that binding fathers and mothers to their biological children is a core purpose of marriage, and more power to him for that. But the logic of his argument is that binding fathers and mothers to their biological children is the *only* purpose that has any compelling claim on society, and that allowing marriage to serve any other purpose hurts children by pushing them to the sidelines. From *a* purpose to *the* purpose is a long leap, and one that leaves the public far behind. Blankenhorn himself cites a poll showing that 13 percent of Americans say "promot[ing] the happiness and wellbeing of the married individuals" is the "more important characteristic of a good marriage," and 10 percent choose "produces children who are well-adjusted and who will become good citizens," but three-quarters say: "The two are about equally important." In other words, the public believes that a good marriage is good for adults *and* good for children, and that there is no conflict. And the public is obviously right. Marriage has more than one essential public purpose. Providing a healthy and secure environment for the rearing of children (biological or adoptive) is certainly one of them (and, of course, many gay couples are raising children), but at least three others, in my view, compel respect: providing a transition to

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stable domestic life for young adults (especially men), providing a safe harbor for sex, and providing lifelong caregivers.

Still others can be found in a 2000 document called *The Marriage Movement: A Statement of Principles*. In a section headed “What Is Marriage?” the manifesto declares that “marriage has at least six important dimensions”: it is a legal contract, a financial partnership, a sacred promise, a sexual union, a personal bond, and a family-making bond. “In all these ways,” the statement continues, “marriage is a productive institution, not a consumer good.”

That manifesto, as you may have guessed, was drafted, endorsed, and disseminated by David Blankenhorn, among others. The Blankenhorn of 2000 was right. Marriage multitasks. It is undoubtedly linked with procreation, but the reductionist Blankenhorn of 2007 gets the relationship backward: Marriage binds children to parents by conditioning procreation on marriage, not by conditioning marriage on procreation. We regard the marriage of infertile (say, elderly) couples as cause for celebration, not condemnation. And, of course, gay couples are just another variety of infertile couple. Even if their unions do not accomplish all the public purposes of marriage, three out of four—or five out of six—ain’t chicken feed.

Blankenhorn, oddly, treats the objection that society values and encourages infertile straight marriages as no objection at all. His three flippant pages explaining why infertility would bar gay but not straight couples from matrimony are the only really embarrassing performance in his book. He says that allowing infertile straight couples to marry no more shows that marriage isn’t for biological parenting than allowing non-drivers to buy cars shows that cars aren’t for driving. He fails to note that marriage is more like a mobile home (some people drive them, some live in them, and some do both), that it is in fact legal for non-drivers to own cars, and that in any case gay couples are already out on the roads by the thousands. He says barring infertile straight couples would be impractical, as if that were the reason we don’t do it. (And, actually, it would be pretty easy; in fact, a satirical Washington state initiative campaign proposes to do it.) Then, backing up, he acknowledges that practicality isn’t the issue, only to tumble headlong into a baffling non sequitur by saying “*there is no need!*” (his emphasis) for a ban on infertile straight marriages because fertile couples will have babies anyway.

In the midst of those pratfalls, he looses this whopper: “Marriage’s main purpose is to make sure that any child born has two responsible parents, a mother and a father who are committed to the child and committed to each other. To achieve this goal, *it has never been necessary*, and it would never be possible, *for society to require that each and every married couple bear a child*” (italics mine). Well, thanks. I rest my case.

Fortunately, Blankenhorn has a stronger argument to make—although in the end it lands him on the horns of another false dilemma. Setting aside the structure of marriage, he considers the structure of support for gay marriage. It is no coincidence, he says, that “*people who professionally dislike marriage almost always favor gay marriage*” (his italics). Marriage’s opponents want to de-privilege marriage, replacing it with a “family diversity” model in which society and law view all family structures as equal and interchangeable. Such folks favor gay marriage, he argues, because they understand it as a step along their downhill path.

Blankenhorn here elides the fact that many egalitarian anti-marriage activists have expressed ambivalence or outright hostility toward same-sex marriage, precisely because they fear it would undercut their liberationist agenda. He also elides the fact that some of the country’s most distinguished and dedicated marriage advocates support same-sex marriage: Paul Amato, William Doherty, William Galston, and Theodora Ooms, among others. He does not explain why a bunch of left-wingers who he and I would probably agree are wrong about almost everything else should be presumed right about same-sex marriage.

Still, Blankenhorn is making a deeper point, and one with an element of truth. He is saying that certain values go together in coherent bundles. If we could have the status quo plus gay marriage, he could live with that. But he thinks we will either get less than gay marriage or much more, because we must choose between two bundles of values, one that puts children at the center of marriage and another that gives primacy to adults. To clinch the point, Blankenhorn draws on two multinational public-opinion surveys. He considers eight questions about marriage, such as “Married people are happier;” “People who want children should marry;” and “Marriage is an outdated institution.” Countries that recognize gay marriage, he finds, are consistently less likely to insist on the importance of marriage than are countries that do not recognize it.

Blankenhorn is saying that only one of these two cultural bundles can sustain marriage as a child-centered public institution. But it is the whole bundle, not just gay marriage, that determines marriage’s fate. With exemplary integrity, Blankenhorn acknowledges as much. “To the degree that it makes any sense to oppose gay marriage, it makes sense *only* if one also opposes with equal clarity and intensity the other main trends pushing our society toward post-institutional marriage” (his italics). So the important question isn’t only gay marriage, or even marriage. Just as important is what else is in these bundles.

Here is one clue. Countries in his data set that recognize same-sex marriage nationally are relatively few and are concentrated in Western Europe, plus Canada and South Africa. Countries that do not recognize same-sex unions, on

the other hand, form a larger and more heterogeneous group, including a few Western countries, but also, for instance, Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Uganda, and Ukraine. It would certainly be surprising if the latter countries did not take a more traditional view of marriage—and very much else.

And so they do. Using data from the World Values Survey—the larger and, as we both agree, more representative of Blankenhorn’s two sources—I looked at how countries with and without same-sex marriage felt on some matters other than marriage. As Blankenhorn points out, countries without same-sex marriage do indeed take more traditional attitudes toward marriage, parenthood, and divorce. But—prepare to be shocked—what correlates most starkly with the absence of gay marriage is intolerance of homosexuals. Meanwhile, people in countries with same-sex marriage are more supportive of teaching children to be independent and tolerant; they are more supportive of women’s equality in work and politics; and they are less insistent that women must be mothers to be fulfilled. They are also more secular and are marginally more supportive of democracy. As it turns out, they also report higher satisfaction with life and feel they have more freedom of choice and control over their lives. If you had to live in a random country chosen from one of these two lists, which list would you choose? As a homosexual American, I can tell you my own answer, and not just because of gay marriage.

Blankenhorn has painted himself into a corner, one where the American public will never join him. If, as he insists, we cannot sustainably mix and match values and policies—combine adult individualism with devoted parenthood, for example, or conjoin same-sex marriage with measures to reduce divorce—then we must choose whether to move in the direction of the Netherlands or Saudi Arabia. I have no doubt which way the public would go. And should.

In fact, however, the public will reject the choice Blankenhorn offers as a false one; and, again, the public will be right. A look at Blankenhorn’s own data shows that the publics of gay-marriage countries have not rejected marriage; on six out of the eight questions he uses as indicators, they agree with non-gay-marriage countries, just by less decisive margins. People in countries recognizing same-sex unions are more accepting of co-habitation and single parenthood than Blankenhorn and I would prefer; but their project is not to reject marriage, except perhaps on Blankenhorn’s reductionist account of it, but to blend and balance it with other values of liberal individualism.

Blankenhorn may think this project futile. He is right to sound cautionary notes. But in recent years, as he points out, U.S. divorce rates have dropped a little

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and teen-pregnancy rates have dropped a lot, while “rates of marital happiness have stabilized and may be increasing.” States are experimenting with reforms to strengthen marriage and reduce unnecessary divorce, and the proportion of African-American children living in two-parent, married-couple homes has stabilized or increased. Those modest but heartening improvements come at precisely the time when gay Americans in the millions—the ordinary folks, not the academicians—have discovered and embraced marriage and family after years of alienation from both.

Blankenhorn and I could argue all day about whether gay marriage is part of the solution or part of the problem. But I feel I have learned a couple of things recently. From giving all those speeches, I have learned that the public takes a more individualistic view of marriage than either Blankenhorn or I would prefer. From his new book, I’ve learned that the public’s view of both marriage and society is nonetheless richer, wiser, and more humane than David Blankenhorn’s—and possibly, for that matter, than my own. Which gives me hope that, whatever the experts say the real purpose of marriage is or is not, the public can ultimately get it right. ■