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THE HEARTS OF MEN

*American Dreams and the
Flight from Commitment*

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INTRODUCTION

Why Women Married Men

Necessity, as well as instinct, sends the ladies pell-mell to the altar; it is only the secondary things, social pressure or conscience, that send the men.

—Emily Hahn, 1956

The fact that men marry in precisely the same numbers as women do conceals a basic inequality of motivation: namely, that in the sort of marriage we have rather suddenly come to see as “traditional,” women need men much more than men need women. When I was growing up in the fifties, everyone acknowledged the “battle of the sexes” in which women “held out” for as long as possible, until, by dint of persuasion, sexual frustration or sudden pregnancy, they “landed a man.” From their side of the battle lines, men viewed the proceedings with a certain sarcastic detachment. For example, a 1958 article in *Esquire* described courtship with humorous references to the military theories of Field Marshal Rommel and offered the following account of a typical girl’s attempt to win an “MRS” degree:

College is four years, okay? . . . A freshman dates everybody. She doesn’t care. A sophomore dates in flurries. . . . Now a junior is looking for real love. She’ll go out three times with a boy who is a Possible. She may worry: there aren’t enough Possibles in her immediate circle of friends. So she gets interested in extra-curricular activities,

French club, things like that. . . . Finally there are senior girls. If they aren't going steady or engaged by November first, they feel the walls closing in. They date only Probables. . . . They talk about a career, but they don't mean it. Let them have six dates with one boy—they'll have him talking about compatibility and the names of their five children.¹

To a young woman of spirit, the battle of the sexes seemed to be a degrading exercise that was hardly worth the prize. From what I could tell of my mother's life, "victory" meant a life sentence to manual labor, relieved only by the intellectual challenge of family quarrels. Yet the grown men around me were, if anything, even more prone to bitterness, and fond of declaiming on the theme of marriage as a "trap" for men and a lifelong sinecure for women. Throughout my childhood I was mystified as to what forces propelled people—especially women—into the "battle" of courtship and, beyond that, the prolonged hostilities of wedded life.

The answer, when it was finally revealed to me later in life, had as much to do with economics as biology. Women were, and to a large extent still are, economically dependent on men. After all, a man could live on his own. He might be lonely, unkempt and nostalgic for home-cooked food, but he would, more than likely, get by. A woman, on the other hand, would be hard pressed to make a living on her own at all. If she had spent her college years changing majors in pursuit of "Probables," or her married life changing diapers, so much the worse; she could expect to enter the labor market as a saleswoman or a waitress earning something near the minimum wage. So what was at stake for women in the battle of the sexes was, crudely put, a claim on some man's wage. Both sexes, of course, were under intense social pressure to enter the fray and resolve it by "settling down," but the penalties for failure were very different. The man who failed to marry or stay married might be judged a little "odd"; the woman might well be poor. In the eyes of the middle-class, mid-century world, he had dodged a responsibility, while she had missed the boat.

The fact that, in a purely economic sense, women need men

more than the other way round, gives marriage an inherent instability that predates the sexual revolution, the revival of feminism, the "me generation" or other well-worn explanations for what has come to be known as the "breakdown of the family." It is, in retrospect, frightening to think how much of our sense of social order and continuity has depended on the willingness of men to succumb in the battle of the sexes: to marry, to become wage earners and to reliably share their wages with their dependents. In fact, most of us require more comforting alternative descriptions of the bond between men and women. We romanticize it, as in the popular song lyrics of the fifties where love was an adventure culminating either in matrimony or premature death. Or we convince ourselves that there is really a fair and equal exchange at work so that the wages men offer to women are more than compensated for by the services women offer to men. Any other conclusion would be a grave embarrassment to both sexes. Women do not like to admit to a disproportionate dependence, just as men do not like to admit that they may have been conned into undertaking what one cynical male called "the lifelong support of the female unemployed."

Social scientists have generally shared these aversions and, on the whole, their accounts of the economics of marriage tend to be flustered or nonexistent. In the early to mid-1970s sociologists produced no less than a half dozen anthologies on the family—its future, its prospects, its changing forms—but few gave more than a passing acknowledgment to its principal source of livelihood—the male wage—and the consequences of that dependence for both internal family relations and the relations of larger social groups.* To judge from much of this literature, marriage exists in some realm outside of ordinary economic ties, and families operate more or less like voluntary

* In one of the rare exceptions within this genre of "family" books Louise Kapp Howe observed trenchantly that ". . . the assumption of a male-breadwinner society—and the social policies and occupational structure and sexist attitudes that flow from that assumption—ends up determining the lives of everyone within a family, whether a male breadwinner is present or not, whether one is living by the rules in suburbia trying to break them on a commune."²

associations or social clubs, which the members have opted to join.

The intellectual groundwork for such an innocent view of marriage had been laid by early twentieth-century social scientists, foremost among them the historian Arthur W. Calhoun. Calhoun was enthusiastic about the modern family he saw emerging from the wilderness past. The old-style, agrarian family had been a unit of production, its members bound together, somewhat brutishly, by economic necessity. Then came industrialization and the removal of production (cloth and clothing manufacture, food processing, etc.) from the home. The modern family, freed from the imperative of collective work, was thought to be no longer bound by economic necessity, but by more "spiritual" needs and concerns. At a safe remove from the commercial world outside, the family "ceases to be a forced grouping, and develops toward ethical unity and spontaneous democracy." To Calhoun and the scholars who followed him, the "companionate family," insulated from the competitiveness and commercialism of the "economy" outside, was not just a liberal ideal, but a description of reality.

What was missing, in this description, was the economy of the family itself. On this point, even Calhoun sometimes wavered. He had thrown "economic necessity" out of the family with the coming of the industrial revolution, and was far too chivalrous to admit that it might be a new kind of economic necessity that bound the modern woman to her husband. Yet when he looked at the middle-class families of his time, he found disturbing signs. Too many women had become "parasitic wives." Too many men had been reduced to mere "earning mechanisms." It occurred to him that with industrialization and the removal of women's traditional productive work from the home, "the father comes to view the family as a responsibility rather than an asset." Grimly, he suggested that this might be "part of the explanation for the phenomenon of family desertion [by men]."³

While Calhoun was equivocating, two of his contemporaries were taking a more hard-headed look at the economics of mar-

riage and the family. They were both intellectual mavericks: one a feminist and a socialist, the other a conservative and a self-professed misogynist. If only because of the tenacity of more sentimental views, their ideas are still fresh, and even radical, today.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the feminist writer and lecturer, came to her views on marriage from unhappy personal experience. Her father was one of the deserters Calhoun warned about. He walked out when Charlotte was very young, leaving his erstwhile family in poverty. Her own marriage to a young painter looked more promising, for, as she later wrote, "a lover more tender, a husband more devoted, woman could not ask." But shortly after the birth of their child, Charlotte (then Stetson) developed a protracted case of what was then called nervous prostration and what we now diagnose as depression. During the ensuing months of prostration and "absolute misery" she had time to contemplate the dark side of even the best marriage. Divorced and largely recovered, she undertook a strenuous, lifelong assault on those things most of her suffragist contemporaries claimed to hold even dearer than the vote—the traditional middle-class marriage and family.

Gilman described the economics of marriage in the language of biology, and the effect was brutal: "The female of the genus homo is economically dependent on the male," she wrote. "He is her food supply."⁴ Marriage was a "sexuo-economic relation," in which men paid money for the personal services performed by women, and paid, ironically, in inverse relation to the work performed. The wives of the poor, lacking servants and conveniences, had to work the hardest and were paid the least: "The women who do the most work get the least money, and the women who get the most money do the least work." Within the middle and upper classes, women's position was parasitical. Most of the tasks they performed could either be done by men and children themselves, abolished without any great discomfort, or (in her utopian vision) collectivized through the creation of inexpensive cafeterias, laundromats, day-care centers, etc. With the domestic work thus dispersed or

dispensed with, women would be free to enter the work force as independent wage earners and to enter marriage as men's equals.

Within the prevailing "sexuo-economic" system, men got the best deal, Gilman thought—though only in moral terms. True, men had to pay a high price for dubious and often inept domestic services, but this was good for them. Anticipating Betty Friedan, she believed that dependency and exclusive concentration on domestic detail infantilized women, potentially making them unfit even for the central vocation of motherhood. And, anticipating George Gilder, she believed that the role of the provider uplifted and "maternalized" men, taming "the destructive action of male energy" and teaching men "to love and care, to work, to serve, to be human." The question Gilman left open was why men should voluntarily undertake such a costly and demanding course in self-improvement.

The iconoclastic journalist H. L. Mencken had an answer, though it is doubtful that Gilman would have liked it. If men got married, he wrote, it was because they were stupid. In a 1918 book cunningly entitled *In Defense of Women*, he described the average man as "an almost incredible popinjay," easily duped by the scheming female of the species. Pathetically, the average male "views it as a great testimony to his prowess at amour to yield up his liberty, his property and his soul to the first woman who, in despair of finding better game, turns her appraising eye upon him." Once married, a man's legal status was little better than an indentured servant's, for "under the contract of marriage, all the duties lie upon the man and all the privileges appertain to the woman." The law required a man to support his wife, but it did not require her to so much as prepare a decent meal, so that

If the average American husband wants a sound dinner he must go to a restaurant to get it, just as if he wants to refresh himself with the society of charming and well-behaved children, he has to go to an orphan asylum.⁵

Whether the average husband sought his meals at diners, his female company at dance halls and his paternal satisfactions

among street urchins, he would still be supporting his own wife and children. And if this seems like a somewhat overwrought description of the male condition, the reader should know that Mencken's intellectual credentials were in perfect order: He himself was a bachelor. Bachelorhood proved a man's "relative freedom from the ordinary sentimentalism of his sex—in other words, of his greater approximation to the clearheadedness of the enemy sex."

Each in their own way, the misogynist Mencken and the feminist Gilman saw through the romance of marriage to the economic reality: In modern industrial society, which was supposed to have freed personal relationships from the bonds of economic necessity, women were the dependents of men. What even Gilman did not fully grasp was that this dependency had become embedded in the workings of the larger economy, and that it would persist—despite the efforts of women and the protests of an occasional male dissident like Mencken—right through the middle of the century.

The American economy, by the early twentieth century, was based on the principle of the family wage: A male worker should be paid enough to support a family. I say "principle" to distinguish from reality. The reality through most of this century is that only the more privileged male workers—those who are members of powerful unions, or of skilled crafts and professions—actually earned enough to support a family. Yet the principle, as Louise Kapp Howe observes, applied to everyone: as a goal for personal upward mobility (a man took pride in the fact that his wife didn't "have" to work) and as a social ideal. Socialists advocated the family wage, trade unionists fought for it, and most feminists, by the turn of the century, either approved or did not oppose it. But, as historian Heidi Hartmann has explained, the fight for the family wage helped establish our present gender-based occupational hierarchy.⁶ Women were squeezed out of higher paying, craft jobs and professions and pushed down to the bottom of the labor market. As it turned out, the other side of the principle that a man should earn enough to support a family has been that a woman doesn't need enough to support even herself.

The perpetuation of the family wage system has depended on two things, one a fact, the other an assumption. The fact is that men, on the average, earn more than women. The assumption is that men use their higher wages to support women, and hence that most women are at least partly supported by men. It is easy to see how the assumption has reinforced the fact, and vice versa. If it is assumed that most women are already supported by men, then they can, in good conscience, be paid less than men. And if women cannot expect to earn a decent wage on their own, they will indeed seek the financial support of individual men. Which reinforces the assumption that men, as supporters of women, deserve higher wages than women, and so forth.

Hence, the basic asymmetry of need that shaped what we used to call "battleground of the sexes." The family wage system guarantees that, at least for economic reasons, women will have a greater interest in marrying and in marrying "well," and a greater financial stake in their marriages than men do. Within this unequal situation, the one thing that salvages women's dignity is the fact that they "work" too, even when not employed outside the home. But domestic labor, Charlotte Perkins Gilman pointed out, has an awkward and uncertain status. Those of us who do it, and I write from personal experience, know that the work of raising children and maintaining a home is mentally demanding, physically strenuous and almost wholly unappreciated by fellow adults. Yet we also know that, above some irreducible biological minimum at which children will go hungry and guests will contract infectious diseases from our dishware, we work at our own pace and according to our own standards. These standards are personal and variable. They are also, as Deirdre English and I argued in *For Her Own Good*, determined by the "expert" arbiters of what constitutes good housekeeping and adequate mothering.⁷ So we ourselves are often hard pressed to tell how much of our work we do out of conformity—or, in some cases, compulsiveness—and how much out of necessity. And whatever we do, we know that men, at least, can survive without it. As sociologist Carol Brown has written:

A wife's personal labor can now be replaced by commercial products, such as self-cleaning ovens. The labor of women is available outside the home. Waitresses serve food and clean tables; nurses tend sick bodies; therapists provide shoulders to cry on. Third, women are publicly available, giving service with a smile on their jobs or sex with a smile after hours. Thus men do not have the incentive to find and cleave unto just one woman until death do they part.⁸

In their official capacities, men have tended to extoll the work of homemaking and child raising, but they seldom offer to pay for it with public funds. President Theodore Roosevelt, for example, once declared homemaking a "career . . . more worthy of honor and . . . more useful to the community than the career of any man, no matter how successful."⁹ Yet neither he nor any of his successors offered women any financial recognition for their efforts, and what public relief became available with the New Deal fell miserably short of the income by which a man would have been judged "successful." Whether homemaking is an essential career, as Roosevelt claimed, or merely a "pseudo-occupation," as sociologist Talcott Parsons later concluded, it has been left to the sponsorship of individual men.

So, well before the recent alarm about the "breakdown of the family," the twentieth-century family wage system had the makings of serious instability. The problems, a modern social scientist might say, were "structural," that is, they were always there, embedded in the very design of the system. If we accept the formulation of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the heterosexual bond depends on a firm division of labor: A woman does X (which could be weaving cloth, tending a store or raising heirs) and a man does Y (which could be fishing or herding or accounting). The only rules are (1) that X be rigidly typed as a female activity and Y as a male activity, so that no one person would be able to do both X and Y for themselves, and (2) that X be considered a pretty fair exchange for Y. But in industrial capitalist societies, the female X became a set of activities which men could do and often did

do for themselves (with the single clear-cut exception of bearing babies) and the male Y boiled down to the business of earning a living. Moreover, the X that women have normally been confined to was an occupation of dubious status and limited marketability. Any man who achieved what Mencken described as "the clearheadedness of the enemy sex" could reasonably conclude that the exchange of Y for X was a poor bargain.

The reader may object that this is far too cold-hearted an analysis. There is, after all, love; there is sexual desire; and there is a kind of emotional dependency that can outlast sexual enthusiasm for decades. In her book *The Future of Marriage*, Jessie Bernard argues that when the intangible satisfactions of marriage are taken into account, it is men, and not women, who are disproportionately dependent. Married men live longer than their single counterparts, and, according to surveys, are happier and more likely to be judged mentally healthy. Among women, there is evidence that the opposite is true; full-time housewives, at any rate, are "sicker" than other women by a variety of measures. Bernard acknowledges that "marriage has had a bad press among men," but insists that "whether they know it or not, men need marriage more than women do." She even speculates that male resentment of marriage represents "a kind of compensatory reaction to their dependence on it."¹⁰

Bernard may be right about men's dependence on the loving care of women. But when we put money back into the exchange, the old asymmetry reappears. In a traditional marriage—that is, the union of a male breadwinner and a female homemaker—the husband may need a variety of emotional satisfactions, as may the wife. But the wife needs, in addition, the wherewithal to buy the groceries, and there is no guarantee that a man's emotional dependency on his wife will last as long as her financial dependency on him. The family wage system takes no account of that great truth reiterated endlessly on AM radio stations: that love is fickle.

The law acknowledges women's financial dependency and, at least in principle, adjures married men to share their wages. In her comprehensive book *The Marriage Contract*, Lenore Weitz-

man reports that almost every state places legal responsibility on the husband to support his wife and children. For example, a 1973 Pennsylvania court stated that "the husband has an absolute moral and legal obligation to support his wife . . ." But, as Weitzman explains, neither the extent of this "obligation" nor the level of support in relation to a man's income has ever been defined, so that the "right to support" in practice means little more than "the privilege of living with the husband."¹¹ After divorce, the law takes only slightly more interest in a woman's financial situation: Only 25 percent of the women who are awarded child support by the courts actually receive it, and 60 percent of these receive less than \$1,500 a year.¹² In short, though a man may earn a "family wage," there is nothing in the law that compels him to share it.

This is perhaps the greatest weakness in any social system based on the principle of the family wage: It depends so much on the volition of individual men. Men are favored in the labor market, both by the kinds of occupations open to them and by informal discrimination within occupations, so that they earn, on the average, 40 percent more than women do. Yet nothing compels them to spread the wealth to those—women and children—who are excluded from work or less generously rewarded for it. Men cannot be forced to marry; once married, they cannot be forced to bring home their paychecks, to be reliable jobholders or, of course, to remain married. In fact, considering the absence of legal coercion, the surprising thing is that men have for so long, and, on the whole, so reliably, adhered to what we might call the "breadwinner ethic."

* * *

This book is about the ideology that shaped the breadwinner ethic and how that ideology collapsed, as a persuasive set of expectations, in just the last thirty years. To describe the change very briefly and oversimply: In the 1950s, where we begin, there was a firm expectation (or as we would now say, "role") that required men to grow up, marry and support their wives. To do anything else was less than grown-up, and the man who willfully deviated was judged to be somehow "less than a

man." This expectation was supported by an enormous weight of expert opinion, moral sentiment and public bias, both within popular culture and the elite centers of academic wisdom. But by the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, adulthood was no longer burdened with the automatic expectation of marriage and breadwinning. The man who postpones marriage even into middle age, who avoids women who are likely to become financial dependents, who is dedicated to his own pleasures, is likely to be found not suspiciously deviant, but "healthy." And this judgment, like the prior one, is supported by expert opinion and by the moral sentiments and biases of a considerable sector of the American middle class.

This drastic change in our cultural expectations of men has been ignored, down-played or else buried under the weary rhetoric of "changing sex roles." Obviously, our expectations of adult womanhood have changed just as dramatically in the last thirty years. The old feminine ideal—the full-time housewife with a station wagon full of children—has been largely replaced by the career woman with attaché case and skirted suit. Partly because the changes in women's role have been given conscious articulation by a feminist movement, changes in men (or in the behavior expected of men) are usually believed to be derivative of, or merely reactive to, the changes in women. Yet I will argue that the collapse of the breadwinner ethic had begun well before the revival of feminism and stemmed from dissatisfactions every bit as deep, if not as idealistically expressed, as those that motivated our founding "second wave" feminists.

Further, I will want to impress on you the profundity of the change represented by the collapse of the breadwinner ethic. In the space of a few decades, our culture has inverted the expectations that made the family wage system in any sense justifiable as a means of distributing wealth from those who are relatively advantaged as wage earners to many of those (women and children) who are not. Men still have the incentives to work and even to succeed at dreary and manifestly useless jobs, but not necessarily to work *for others*.

This is a book about ideas, images, perceptions, opinions

from various sources—and I leave it to the sociologists to trace the behavioral and attitudinal changes that have accompanied the changes in ideas. But ideas do come from someone, and in our society, the ideas we live by and shape our judgments in accordance with, have tended to come from the men (and, more rarely, women) of what is variously called the "new class," the "professional-managerial class" or far less precisely, the middle class. This is not to discount the generative role of the capitalist class, which employs so much of the professional-managerial middle class, or of the working class, which is, in turn, educated, managed and often even spoken for by the middle class. But in a year-by-year sense it is the men in the middle who are the "knowledge producers," whether they are generating "scientific" truths about human nature and possibilities, distilling these truths for popular consumption, or reflecting upon them in fiction and films. These men crafted and popularized the ideology that had supported the breadwinner ethic, and when the ideology changed, it was because they changed it. For this reason I feel justified in using a more active construction than the "collapse of the breadwinner ethic" and talking about a *male revolt*—though hardly organized and seldom conscious of its goals—against the breadwinner ethic.

As a feminist, I have been busy with another revolt for the past twelve years, and I approached this one with initial antagonism, a gradual increase in understanding and, finally, a certain impatience. The great irony, as I will argue later, is that the right-wing, antifeminist backlash that emerged in the 1970s is a backlash not so much against feminism as against the male revolt. We live in a time that is dangerous to dissidents of all persuasions, and not least to those too helpless and impoverished to dissent. The question is whether we rebels of both sexes have enough in common to work together toward a more generous, dignified and caring society.