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Gay Marriage, Heterosexual Marriage, and The Family: A Critical Analysis of the Conservative Argument Against Gay Marriage

Currently in the United States, one need not delve far into the media to indentify that the issues concerning gay marriage presently lay at the forefront of controversial topics in American political discourse. The recent Proposition 8 trial brought the case of gay marriage to U.S. District Court, as it sought to overturn the California ban placed on gay marriage in 2008. On August 4th, Chief U.S. District Judge Vaughn Walker ruled Proposition 8 unconstitutional, asserting the defense failed to provide “any rational basis in singling out gays and lesbians for denial of a marriage license” (Ambinder). The foundation on which the defense justified their position reflects the belief of the majority of conservative, anti-gay Americans, especially family based and religious organizations. They claimed same-sex marriage would endanger heterosexual marriage, and consequently, would lead to the deterioration of the family. However, I argue that these assertions lack validity since the construction of The American Family is an ideology, which does not transcend across cultures or throughout human history. In fact, the structure of The American Family has changed significantly in U.S. history, often due to changes in heterosexual marriage. In this paper, I will analyze the fears of conservative America concerning gay marriage and its influence on the sanctity of marriage and The Family, as well as explore the history of marriage, the Family, and homosexuality to disprove the evidence anti-gay Americans present to defend their position.

One of the principle flaws in the conservative argument against gay marriage rests in the assumption that the American construct of marriage and family has been cross-culturally accepted throughout history. David Blackenhorn, President for the Institute for American Values and the primary

witness for the defense in the Proposition 8 trial, claimed in his testimony that the central feature of marriage as “a socially approved sexual relationship between a man and a female” appears uniformly in human history uses marriage to establish a social relationship between biological parents and their children (Beck). Blackenhorn’s ethnocentric view of family echoes the ideas of Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist who in the early 20th century wrongly convinced social scientists that “The Family” was a universal human institution, a claim that has been proven grossly inaccurate through anthropological study and evidence (Collier, Jane et al 25).

In 1913, Bronislaw Malinowski published *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines*, which detailed his conclusion of The Family’s universality. Through his work, he argued that The Family must exist cross-culturally due to the universal human need of nurturance, particularly nurturance of young children. He defined The Family, his perception of the universal family structure, as possessing three key characteristics: (1) consisting of a defined set of individuals who could distinguish one another from outsiders; (2) sharing a definite physical space; (3) had feeling of affection for one another (26-27). His model describes most industrialized nations construction of the family; however, it fails to apply universally. In the past, Huli wives and husbands of central Papua New Guinea, for instance, ate and slept in separate houses. Only after the influence of western Christian organizations, which urged the Huli to adopt “family houses” did husbands and wives begin to live together. However, often these houses have strong divisional lines that separate the house into two domains: one for the husband and one for the wife and the kids (Wardlow 53-54). Not only does this demonstrate the failure of Malinowski’s model, I argue that it suggests that some cases in which tribal structures do exhibit models of The Family is linked to influences of Western society and its ethnocentric belief in The Family as the apex of a social unit.

Malinowski's assertion is further dismantled due to his false assumption of the universality of the word "family." In the article titled "Is There A Family?," Collier, Rosaldo, and Yanagisako argue that many cultures "...have no word to identify the unit of parents and children that English speakers call the 'family'" (28). They provide the example of the Zinacantecos of southern Mexico, whose basic social unit is called a "house" which consists of one to twenty people. Although the Zinacantecos have words to distinguish between an individual's parents, children, and spouse, they do not have a term to differentiate the unit consisting of a mother, father, and children from their social unit of the "house" (28). Therefore, the crux of Malinowski's argument, that humans naturally divide themselves based upon blood relations of mother, father and children, completely deteriorates. Although The Family does not appear cross-culturally, kinship, which is a system through which relationships are recognized and people relate to one another, does. The Family, or the American Family, provides only one example of a kinship system. Yet, despite that it is the widely accepted anthropological view that The Family "is a moral and ideological unity that appears, not universally, but in particular social orders," this view of family has not been fully adopted by the general public (33). Blackenhorn, like Malinowski, falsely views all modes of kinship as family structures, and consequently assumes the universality of the family to assert his viewpoints. His entire testimony, therefore, and the case of the defense against gay marriage in the Proposition 8 trial, along with other conservatives who support his claim lack validity, as his evidence and assertions are based of ignorant and inaccurate ethnocentric perceptions.

The crux of the reactions against gay marriage, however, lies in the conservative fear of gay marriage as detrimental to the sanctity of marriage and to The American Family. In 1994, the American Family Association published a compilation of essays titled "Homosexuality in America: Exposing the Myths." Richard Howe, the president of an apologetics ministry, in his essay claims "we don't have to look at the vast spans of history to know that the contemporary state of decay in America and the

breakdown of the family is due, at least in part, to the presence of homosexuality” (Howe 3). Why does Howe, along with other conservatives and the defense for the Proposition 8 trial express this overwhelming fear concerning the well being of the family?

According to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, the dynamics of the American family have experienced significant change within the past few decades. From 1980 to 2007, the percentage of households with married couples and children dropped from 60.8% to 50.8%, while the percentage of single-parent households increased from 19.5% to 28.8% (“Table 1302”). During this time, the marriage rate per 1,000 people between the ages of 15-64 declined from 15.9 to 10.9, with nearly 50% of those ending in divorce (“Table 1300”). These statistics demonstrate that the construction of The American Family is indeed changing, however, they do not suggest that the family is being destroyed. I argue that conservatives in reality fear the deterioration of the “symbols of American kinship” (Schneider 49). In his paper, “The Family,” David Schneider argues that the construct of the American family arises from the attempt to balance the order of nature and the human reason, or validate the “animalistic” desire for sex with procreation. As homosexual couples are unable to produce the symbolic “unity of flesh and blood” in the form of biological offspring, conservatives argue they are unable to replicate the “natural” balance, which they believe will lead to the instability of society (37).

However, as The Family is an ideology and not a concrete structure, it is adaptable to changes in society, and therefore, any alteration to its structure does not change society, but instead, the transformation it experiences are consequences of societal reform. The construction of the American Family in the form of the idealistic nuclear family arose due to changes and demands from society, while the dynamics of heterosexual marriage has altered significantly within the last century of U.S. history, demonstrating that our current perception of family and marriage reflects adaptations due to societal pressures; pressures that can be easily compared to the current gay marriage movement. Also, in

the remainder of this paper I will argue that the changes in the heterosexual model of marriage actually paved the path for the emergence of the idea of homosexual marriage.

As Industrialization transferred production out of the home and into the public domain, it redefined the roles of husbands and wives, and led to the establishment of the nuclear family, an ideology that still serves as the paradigm for The American Family (Collier, Jane, et al). In order to prevent the intrusion of the public sphere and to provide an escape from the impersonal settings of the factories, the private sphere had to be distinguishable, resulting in the transformation of the home into a “haven” for the wage worker of the family. The system of the family thus had to adapt to fulfill the required functions resulting from the industrialization of production and the distinction between public and private spheres. In most cases, the breadwinner was the man of the household, and therefore the husband had control over the finances and economic health of the family. The responsibilities of the wife, on the other hand, rested solely on social reproduction, particularly the rearing of children. Whereas in pre-industrialization era, women helped with the production of household goods, and therefore, had some influence in the financial matters of the household, the dynamics of industrialization resulted in women’s dependence on men and rise of the Cult of True Womanhood, which promoted women’s submissiveness, piety, and domesticity. Marriage, therefore, relied on a woman’s financial dependence on men and men’s obligatory right to provide for and protect women. As capitalism and the economy bloomed, this structure came to represent its principle and therefore, the American aspiration and the principle model of The American Family. Thus, The American Family is not an ancient construct, but one that grew out of an adaptation to societal needs and demands.

Industrialization further revolutionized the perception of sexuality, leading to the construction of the terms “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality.” The growth of the consumer economy as a result of the increase of production due to industrialization caused Americans to view the human body no longer

as simply an instrument of work, but as a vehicle for consumption and pleasure (Katz 13). Parallel to this development, children no longer were viewed as modes of economic gain or as “more hands in the field,” leading to less children per family. These two notions collectively, along with other factors, created the emergence of the “pleasure ethic” and the new view of sex as an act outside of the realm of reproduction (13).

The detachment of sex from reproduction allowed scientists in the late 19th century and the early 20th century to explore human sexuality. As doctors attempted to identify and distinguish between individuals attracted to those of the opposite sex and those of the same sex, the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality were generated. These terms were not originally viewed as a “normal/pervert duo,” nor did the heterosexual initially “exemplify the quintessence of the normal” (Katz 15). Instead, the current stigmatism and connotations emerged as a result of societal and media influence. However, the point I wish to argue is that the emergence of the term homosexuality, and thus homosexuality as an identity arose out of the change in heterosexual marriage and sex, which resulted from pressures in society.

As heterosexual marriage continued to change throughout the century, the building blocks for the idea of a homosexual union were further established. In August of 1920, after spending approximately 42 years in Congress, the 19th Amendment was passed, granting women the right to vote, and consequentially power in matters outside of the household (“The Constitution: the 19th Amendment”). As women procured more rights, they left the domestic sphere for the public domain, acquiring jobs that secured them financial independence from their husbands. While in the past women had to marry in order to survive economically, as they obtain financial independence, this is no longer true (Rich 85). Marriage no longer served as a means for women’s financial security, and thus no longer viewed as men’s obligatory right to provide for and protect women. The two partners in the marriage gained autonomy from one another and established equality amidst them. The establishment of no-fault divorce

in the 1970s further cemented the independence of husband and wife, as it changed the perception of divorce from a means of necessity due to abuse or neglect to a means of freedom based on “irreconcilable differences.” Thus, marriage has transformed from a responsibility of gender dynamics and positions of inferiority and superiority, as well as a means of reproduction, to a partnership based on equality and the “pleasure ethic.” The key components of marriage homosexual partnerships lacked in the past, the ability to reproduce and a system of gender dynamics, no longer pertain to marriage; therefore, homosexual marriage would not undermine the current system of marriage or deteriorate it, but instead, uphold its current state.

The current conservative, anti-gay discourse against marriage lacks validity due to their reliance on three key inaccurate assumptions: the universality of The Family, The Family’s as a fixed structure, and the institution of marriage as a stagnant union between a man and a female. As I have proven in this paper, our idealistic view of The American Family does not exist cross culturally, although kinship groups and other models of family do, yet we must also remember that the universality of family does not truly exist in the United States, even in the earliest 20th century during the height of industrialization and the nuclear family. Gaps will always exist due to the sheer fact that The Family is an ideology, and reality never completely coalesces with idealistic structures. Through the historical analysis of The Family and marriage, I assert that these institutions adapt to social change, and furthermore, their alterations throughout the past century have laid the foundation of which the case of gay marriage can build. The transformation of heterosexual marriage influenced the emergence of the current homosexual movement, but the true foundation and route catalyst for the transformation of societal constructs is the pressure of society itself. Therefore, I conclude, one can not assert that homosexual marriage would alter heterosexual marriage, but instead, it is the societal pressure calling for gay marriage that creates this change.

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