# Part II: Sex and gender

## Chapter 4: Family models

In particle physics, the so-called “Standard Model” is a flawed yet widely accepted picture of how the universe works— the rules and formulas governing elementary particles like electrons and quarks, the forces holding together atoms and molecules, the theoretical basis of electricity and magnetism. It’s been in development since the Atomic Age in the mid-20th century, continually tweaked and refined but never upended, and it accounts so precisely for so much of what we can observe in the lab that alternative theories are often regarded as exotic, even fringe. For now, it has no serious competitors. Still, we know that it can’t really be complete or even correct, because it has no way of accounting for the big picture: the force of gravity that tells us which way is up, the mysterious dark matter that holds together galaxies, the accelerating expansion of the universe. It’s a convenient fiction.

When it comes to sex, relationships, and reproduction, there’s also something like a Standard Model, and it, too, found its name in the Atomic Age: the Nuclear Family. This supposedly elementary social building block consists of one man and one woman in a sexually and romantically exclusive relationship, typically having children together and raising them in a house until they’re ready to move out and eventually settle down with spouses of their own to repeat the cycle. The man has a paid job and brings in money, while the woman runs the household. People (men especially) are defined by specialized work and valued for their individual achievements. Ownership of assets is individual or “joint” (meaning belonging to the couple), and one of life’s main goals is to amass as much wealth as possible. People are free to dispose of their assets more or less as they wish, with their legal children inheriting equal shares by default when both parents die. Sexual or romantic liaisons outside the exclusive pair bond are out of bounds. When pursued furtively, they’re a source of both guilt and, if exposed, shame. Any children known to have been born of such an unsanctioned liaison face inheritance challenges and lifelong stigma as “illegitimate” or, to use an older and even uglier term, bastards. These rules and norms doubtless all sound very familiar.

Many of us were brought up to think of them as not just familiar, but universal. Whether ironic or not, the Hanna-Barbera cartoons I remember endless reruns of growing up— *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*— were built around the premise that from the Stone Age to the Space Age, however much the technological trappings may evolve, the Nuclear Family has always been and will always be the fundamental unit of human sociality. These cartoons were entirely typical. The whole edifice of mainstream 20th century media, from Norman Rockwell paintings to *Leave it to Beaver* sitcoms, agreed; more broadly, much of American (and more broadly modern Western) society was built on the presumption of this kind of domesticity. That includes laws, institutions, customs, entertainment, housing, transportation, jobs, infrastructure, and even— as with handedness— the very language we think with.

In his 1837 book *The Philosophy of Marriage*,[[1]](#footnote-22) the physician Michael Ryan summarized the widely held view— especially then, but still today— that the monogamous pair bond underlies not only our entire political economy, but the reproductive future of humanity. This, despite the fact that it’s far from universal, and is “unnatural,” insofar as it doesn’t come easily to many, requiring constant legal and social enforcement:

POLYGAMY, or Polygyny, is sanctioned by laws of eastern nations […]. Although polygamy is interdicted by our laws, it does not exist the less in the hearts of most men who profess to be monogamous, but who are no less polygamous by their actions. […] St. Augustin, Grotius, and other moralists, admit this truth, but declare it would be contrary to morals, the interests of society, and the increase of population. Nevertheless, polygamy, or concubinage, is common among the higher classes in all civilised countries. […] [The] promiscuity of the sexes would be justifiable according to many writers (Pliny, Diodorus, Siculus, &c.), and […] there are some few eastern countries in which a community of women was, and even now is tolerated. […] It is easy to adduce many valid reasons to prove that this community of women, and promiscuous intercourse of the sexes, can never be tolerated in any enlightened country. It must be obvious to the commonest understanding, that without marriage, neither paternity, nor family, nor patrimonial possession, nor division of landed property, nor legitimacy could be accurately determined; and thence it would follow that all would belong to all, every one would be benefitted in common, no one would exert himself for all his race, and the result would be a state of barbarism as in savage nations, and all the laws of society would be overturned. This perfect community of women and property, if it could take place, could only exist among people living as savages, and among a very small number on a vast territory. Suppose the community of women was established, what man would willingly allow an infant to be affiliated to him, of which he had any right to doubt that he was the father? The woman would violate the sacred duty of nursing her own infant only, and in a few centuries the human race could not be preserved; there would also be incessant desertions of infants, and a great increase of infanticides, crimes unfortunately too common; even under existing laws, but which would be innumerable in proportion as the people and their morals became more corrupted, and where no asylums would exist for the fruits of universal debauchery. Every fine feeling of paternal and natural love would be destroyed; all cares and protection of children would be at an end, and the mortality would become so great as in a few ages to exterminate the human race.

Whew, that’s a lot to unpack!

For starters, Ryan’s curious phrase “community of women” read differently in 1837 than it might today. He meant not so much the idea of a sisterhood or community *among* women, as that they’d be communal *property*— specifically, the communal property of men, who are clearly the intended readers here. There’s no corresponding “community of men.” Ryan can imagine non-monogamy— it looks a lot like communism— but if anything, it’s even more patriarchal than the monogamous alternative, in which a woman “belongs” to *one* man, rather than to *all* men. A grim picture.

Despite Ryan’s chauvinism, catastrophizing, and pearl-clutching, there are elements of truth here. Among documented societies, sanctioned polygyny (sexual relationships between one man and multiple women) is a good deal more common than sanctioned polyandry (sexual relationships between one woman and multiple men), and polygynynous societies do tend to be highly patriarchal.[^2] Also, as we’ll see, the relationship between communism and non-monogamy is quite real, both in traditional societies and among the freethinking sexual pioneers advocating “free love” who had begun to spring up during this period, much to Ryan’s dismay.

This passage is also a reminder that the 20th century Standard Model had already departed in significant ways from its 19th century precursor (itself a recent invention), mainly due to the slow but steady progress of the women’s rights movement. It wasn’t until the 1848 Married Woman’s Property Act, passed in New York and used as a model in other states, that a married woman could enter into contracts, collect rent or receive inheritances, or enter into lawsuits on her own.[[2]](#footnote-23) Such basic obstacles to independence survived far into the 20th century; until 1974, many American banks required married women’s husbands to cosign any credit application, and Irish women only won the right to own their own homes in 1976. Legally and financially speaking, a married woman in the 19th century really was, in many respects, her husband’s property. An 1854 critique of marriage by Thomas Low Nichols (1815-1901) and Mary Sargeant Gove Nichols (1810-1884), just the kind of “free love” activists Ryan was railing against, put this in the starkest possible terms:[[3]](#footnote-26)

In the early ages slave and wife were convertible terms. The slave became the wife of her master, the wife no less became his slave. In both cases they were sometimes purchased, sometimes taken captives in war; sometimes they were presents, given as the hostages of peace and friendship. […] The great wrong of slavery consists in the power which it gives to one human being over another. A husband has almost precisely the same power over the wife that the master has over the slave.

A century later, this comparison would have been far less appropriate; women in the United States could vote, sign contracts, and own their own assets. Most could freely choose whom to marry, or whether to marry at all. However, like racial equity, gender equity remained— and still remains— very much an incomplete project. In traditional marriages with one wage-earner, that earner is still likelier to be the husband than the wife (though this is slowly changing).[^5] And even when a woman works a paying job, her wage is likely to be significantly lower than a man’s. Numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics paint the picture vividly.

Here the dots are raw data from the Bureau, and the lines are smoothed versions to make the trends easier to see.

Women of all ages, from 1979 until 2017 (the year these data were released), earn on average at most 90% or so of what men earn. Despite gradual improvement over these 38 years, the gap has stubbornly refused to close. To many, like Cris, a woman in her forties from Tennessee, this isn’t news:

I was born on a day that was a huge step forward for womans rights, while my full name indicates female, i have never went by it, nor was I raised with my parents calling me by it. They done this so it would be easier on me in life for the job market.

Women of high school age have been consistently earning 90% or so of men’s income for over forty years, while older women have been catching up to, but never exceeding, that plateau. In dollar terms, the incomes in question are much lower at younger ages, so even those 10% gaps for 16-24 year olds can make the difference between being able to scrape by on their own and not. Among older people making more money, though, the differences become far larger, both in dollars and in percentages. If you were a 50 year old woman earning an average wage in 1979, that amounted to only 55% of what the average 50 year old man made. By 2017 the figure had risen to 75%— an improvement, but still not great. Now, consider this difference in terms of accumulated savings, with compound interest, over a lifetime; this explains why women have much less wealth at retirement than men, and fall below the poverty line at far higher rates than men.[[4]](#footnote-27) Such considerations would have strongly incented Wilma to marry Fred Flintstone, even if she worked full-time and wasn’t really all that into him. If a baby came along, the case for keeping the Nuclear Family together would become even more compelling, given the primary role mothers play in providing for their children. Alimony notwithstanding,[[5]](#footnote-28) many unhappy wives have stayed married for the kids’ sake.

Despite these factors, the Standard Model for American families has never been as universal as it was made out to be on TV— with working moms, grandparents, and other relatives living under the same roof, communal living arrangements, children moving back in after college or never moving out in the first place, divorce and blended families, adoption and surrogacy all commonplace. For that matter, it’s hard to ignore the whiteness, suburban-ness, and middle-classness of this supposed standard. In the Antebellum South, it certainly didn’t apply to the enslaved population; nor have Black, Native, and immigrant communities of later generations necessarily fit the mould.

This isn’t just true of minority or immigrant populations in the United States today; quite the opposite. Confronted with a wealth of historical evidence from still-extant traditional societies, researchers working at the intersections of evolutionary biology, psychology, economics, and anthropology have finally begun to realize how peculiar the Nuclear Family really is. Traditional societies, which is to say, nearly all societies until very recently, tend to be built instead around clan structures, with high rates of cousin marriage continually reinforcing extended kinship networks. The old-fashioned phrase “kith and kin” is sometimes used, emphasizing that these networks include both genetic relatives, or kin, and so-called “fictive kin,” or “kith.” (If you had “uncles” or “aunts” as a kid who were in fact not related by blood or marriage, these were kith.) Such social networks are both stable and fluid, meaning that dense interconnectedness maintains a sense of belonging and community stability even as people occasionally join or wander off to seek their fortune elsewhere.

How does family life work in such a setting? Anthropologist and primatologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy has convincingly argued that a good deal of what makes humans special (and unique among the great apes) is made possible by alloparenting— our habit of caring for each others’ young— and in particular cooperative breeding, in which the babysitters aren’t themselves mothers; they may be young or post-menopausal females, or males.[[6]](#footnote-29) Our survival likely depended on this for hundreds of thousands of years, since in a traditional society, it’s extremely difficult for a mother alone to procure the thirteen million calories needed to raise a child to maturity. It helps to have dads, grandmas, and friendly neighbors bearing snacks. And not just snacks. We’re born helplessly inept. Unlike other animals with more complete (though also more limited) instinctual behavioral repertoires, we must learn a great deal from others to become self-sufficient. This requires an investment in time and mentorship from multiple adults, older siblings, cousins, and so on. It truly does take, if not a village, at least a committed social network of helpers.

Hrdy also points out a related, darker finding: “Along with humans, marmosets and tamarins are virtually the only primates where mothers have been observed to deliberately harm their own babies or leave newborns to die.”[[7]](#footnote-30) As it turns out, these species also stand out as the most cooperative breeders among our primate cousins. The mothers tend to commit infanticide when they know they won’t have the community support they need to successfully raise their offspring.

This puts the high rate of infanticide and baby abandonment that so worried Michael Ryan in *The Philosophy of Marriage* in a new light. The 18th and 19th centuries saw dramatic rises in these practices throughout Western Europe.[[8]](#footnote-31) This coincided with the start of a great migration of people away from a more traditional life in the countryside and into cities, far from kith and kin. Those cities, in turn, didn’t yet provide anything like the state assistance, food banks, social services, daycare centers, kindergartens, and so on that might have taken up the alloparental slack for the displaced poor. The English Poor Laws were important steps toward organized state assistance, but gave rise to Victorian-era workhouses designed to be punitive, with awful food, family separation, and other disincentives to try to ensure that life in them would never be chosen if there were any alternative. Since poor working people were already immiserated, this often meant truly dire conditions.[[9]](#footnote-32) Ryan likely had it backwards, then, when he claimed that free love communes would result in wholesale infanticide. It was the London of his day that did so.

In traditional “kith and kin” societies, where relationships are paramount, individualism plays a more modest role than in modern urban life, and work tends to be less specialized. As we’ve seen, child rearing is a collective effort. Housing and property ownership (when they exist) are often collective too, and are usually controlled by men— patriarchy being perhaps the one Flintstones-Jetsons motif that really does have a long history. Such patterns persist even in the lives of white city-dwelling Westerners today, and are especially evident in the (underrepresented) accounts of the contemporary poor and working class. For instance, self-published English activist and author D. Hunter writes in his 2018 autobiography, *Chav Solidarity*,

As a seven year old I was shown how to be a lookout during a robbery, and not long after, my cousins taught me how to steal a car. All of the rewards for this were collectivised, except that my grandfather took as much as he wanted. […] One of my uncles was fiercely respected for the amount of money he brought into our family, but he lived in a one bedroom flat which was furnished with a mattress, a TV and nothing else. I only have a thin recollection of the flat but I’m not convinced it had a bathroom. This was acknowledged, but never challenged, it was raised by others as an example of how we all should be. […] The money went to uncles and aunts with children instead, so that those kids wouldn’t go short. […] My grandfather took whatever he wanted from the collective pot, and I’m sure he would say, that as the responsibility for everyone else was with him, it was only right. […] If one of my cousins was given something, they would share it without a second thought. Nothing was saved for later; nothing was personal property.”

Families like Hunter’s tend to be marginalized in societies defined by norms and institutions at odds with their traditional culture. Often they live outside the law, rendering the underlying structures that have organized their lives for countless generations invisible to outsiders. They might get by mainly with cash, in a black- or gray-market economy. This makes many of the affordances cities offer their middle classes harder for such communities to tap into, locking them into cycles of intergenerational poverty. Schools, governments, banks, potential employers, and social services demanding that forms be filled out (parent or guardian, permanent address, occupation, income, etc.) require semi-fictive responses. Similarly, while legal marriages do exist, the many and varied sexual encounters Hunter recounts often don’t occur within them, or within any of the parameters considered socially or even legally acceptable today. They certainly don’t follow the monogamous Nuclear Family model.

Non-monogamous sexual relationships (meaning, anything outside a sexually exclusive long-term pair bond) are also the norm in traditional societies, whether settled, nomadic, or somewhere in between. The specifics vary widely, and may tend to be more fluid and less patriarchal among hunter-gatherers or other societies with temporary settlements, less dependent on property ownership. In such a setting, polyandry may be a good idea: a mother’s vagueness about the paternity of her children won’t cost them an inheritance, but might offer a fine strategy for expanding the network of alloparents (including potential fathers and *their* kin— a bonanza of indulgent aunties, uncles, and grandparents).[[10]](#footnote-33) In traditional agricultural societies, though, land and livestock tend to be owned by men. Fixed settlements of varying grandeur can be built on that land, and the labor needed to farm it can itself become a commodity. In this setting, patriarchy tends to predominate; number of wives, as much as access to land, livestock, and labor, signifies a man’s social rank, and since assets pass from fathers to sons, paternity is all-important. Given roughly equal numbers of women and men, many women end up sharing a high-status male partner, while large numbers of lower-status men remain single. Some version of this more patriarchal traditional model still holds in many places today.

So where did Nuclear Families come from? Joseph Henrich, chair of the Department of Human Evolutionary Biology at Harvard, argues that they’re a defining feature of what he memorably calls WEIRD societies: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic.[[11]](#footnote-34) Monogamy and the suppression of cousin marriage, both key to establishing the Nuclear Family model, were Christian religious policies, advanced with varying success throughout Europe in the Middle Ages as natural laws and expressions of God’s will (despite numerous Biblical counterexamples[[12]](#footnote-35)). These policies had profound economic and political consequences. As a somewhat cynical 26 year old survey respondent put it,

I do not believe in monogamy or marriage. I believe they are created by those in power (government and religion) to keep people under control. The government needs couples to buy homes, create children and keep the economy humming. And religion uses marriage and monogamy for power, control and access to money.

While there’s a whiff of conspiracy theory about the way this is put, it’s… not wrong. (Though of course non-monogamous arrangements have their own politics, and their own ways of perpetuating power.) Beyond offering avenues for social control by the church or the state, though, WEIRD societies foster social stability in other ways. Several lines of evidence suggest that large numbers of unpartnered males with little to lose drive higher rates of violence and instability in traditional societies, which may be one reason that the enforcement of monogamy created a competitive advantage for WEIRD societies.

A Christian belief in the universality of God’s strictures may have kept most Westerners from realizing how unusual their Nuclear Family model actually was, even when, as with the Flintstones and Jetsons, the Christianity wasn’t overt. Or maybe it was hard to notice how atypical this model was simply because the worldwide influence of WEIRD societies has grown so pervasive over the past several centuries. Scientific research, technology, political power, and wealth are all overwhelmingly WEIRD-dominated today.[[13]](#footnote-36) The media, social norms, and psychology of WEIRD societies have also infused many other societies globally, both through imposition from outside (which we might call cultural hegemony), and through voluntary copying, appropriation, or local adaptation, as humans have always done. These phenomena have all created feedback loops, perpetuating and reinforcing each other. Still, it’s important to remember that WEIRD people remain a minority, and represent a small fraction of humanity historically.

The real Flintstones, then, were decidedly not WEIRD; the way Paleolithic people actually lived wouldn’t have made for family-friendly TV in 1960s America. But nor would the lives of many people today, whether from non-Western societies, or from immigrant, poor, or working class communities.

What about the Jetsons? Let’s assume a non-dystopian scenario in which future generations are at a minimum educated, industrialized, and rich (“EIR”). Even so, far from being a universal norm, the Nuclear Family may turn out to be a short-lived historical footnote, a transitional step between a “kith and kin” past and an emerging model whose outlines we can just start to make out.

What are those outlines? This is the central question Part II of this book will attempt to answer. Chapter 5 will focus on emerging patterns in romantic and sexual exclusivity— in a way, the least radical of the changes we’ll explore, since this exclusivity has always been preached more than practiced. In Chapters 6 and 7, we’ll take a closer look at the way heteronormativity— the force that binds Nuclear Families together— is in decline, and in Chapter 8 and 9, we’ll delve into the implications for (and about) women’s sexuality. Finally, in Chapters 10 to 14, we’ll see how biology and culture are interacting to redefine sex and gender.

The capsule summary is that today, many people aren’t romantically or sexually exclusive; aren’t having children, or are approaching parenthood in different ways; aren’t heterosexual; aren’t as reliant on property ownership; and aren’t living in either multigenerational *or* nuclear households. Increasing numbers of people are also questioning, tweaking, or entirely discarding the gender binary that has underpinned both the Nuclear Family and earlier, more traditional social structures. Though historical context can help us make sense of these trends, they’re far from a return to a preindustrial past. They represent something new.

Seen from a certain perspective, these changes can have radical, even posthuman overtones. Science fiction writers like Kim Stanley Robinson have imagined futures in which gender is just one of many fluidly alterable bioengineered variables for our descendants, who may also range from three to ten feet tall, splice in the DNA of other species, and adapt themselves to live anywhere from the dark side of Mercury to the moons of Saturn.[[14]](#footnote-37) Our lifetimes may become unconstrained by a biological clock; babies may become rare, and may be grown in artificial wombs. Even these versions of posthumanity are conservative compared to “uploading,” in which we all scan our brains and become virtual beings, unmoored from bodies or the constraints of the physical world. What could human or personal identity even mean in a universe like that?

Imagining life in such a world can induce a kind of vertigo, even horror. Then again, our own lives would be equally alien to our ancestors. It helps to remember that we humans are a uniquely culturally constituted species. So much about our lives and bodies is already a product of our cumulative culture and technology— from our lack of fur (due to the invention of clothes) to our short gut (due to cooking with fire) to our ability to drink milk in adulthood (still a work in progress, or if we all end up vegan, an evolutionary spur).[^17] In this sense at least, we’re already highly engineered, and we have ourselves been the unwitting engineers. Profound culturally induced changes in gender and sexuality may, then, just be the next steps on a long road we began walking millions of years ago when we tamed fire, our brains began growing rapidly, and cultural development began to snowball over generations, radically reshaping not only our bodies but ultimately everything around us.

1. Micheal Ryan, *The Philosophy of Marriage: In Its Social, Moral, and Physical Relations. With an Account of the Diseases of the Genito-Urinary Organs Which Impair or Destroy the Reproductive Function, and Induce a Variety of Complaints; with the Physiology of Generation in the Vegetable and Animal Kingdoms; Being Part of a Course of Obstetric Lectures Delivered at The North London School of Medicine, Charlotte Street, Bloomsbury Square* (London: John Curchill, 1837), 91–93. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
2. [[REF]] Secondary sources include <https://www.oneadvisorypartners.com/blog/the-history-of-women-and-money-in-the-united-states-in-honor-of-womens-history-month> <https://www.theguardian.com/money/us-money-blog/2014/aug/11/women-rights-money-timeline-history> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
3. Thomas Low Nichols and Mary Sargeant Gove Nichols, *Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results* (New York: T.L. Nichols, 1854), 91–92. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
4. “Gender Economic Inequality,” Inequality.org, n.d., https://inequality.org/facts/gender-inequality/#gender-wealth-gaps. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
5. In 2001, only 52% of divorced mothers in the United States received their full child support payments. For women who had children out of wedlock, the figure was about 32%. These data are per Susan Dominus, “The Fathers’ Crusade,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/08/magazine/the-fathers-crusade.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
6. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (Harvard University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
7. Ibid., 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
8. Rachel Ginnis Fuchs and Stephanie McBride-Schreiner, “Foundlings and Abandoned Children,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online Datasets* (Oxford University Press, January 13, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199791231-0075. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
9. [[REF]] Dickens, but note local variation and shifts over time. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
10. Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
11. [REF]. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
12. The Old Testament is full of patriarchs and kings with multiple wives, including Esau, Abraham, Jacob, Elkanah, David, and Solomon. Exodus 21:10 advises that if a man takes another wife, then of the first one, “her food, her raiment, and her duty of marriage, shall he not diminish”; Deuteronomy 21:15–17 clarifies the rules of inheritance for sons in polygynous marriages. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
13. China is now poised to surpass the West in a number of ways, and lacks the “D” as well as the “W,” though significantly, during its “modernization” in the 20th century, it systematically adopted a number of WEIRD social norms and concepts, as did many other countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
14. Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312* (London: Orbit, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)