Article

Prepared by: Elvio Angeloni, *Pasadena City College*

The Invention of Marriage

STEPHANIE COONTZ

Learning Outcomes

After reading this article, you will be able to:

- Explain why marriage was an early and vitally important human invention.
- Discuss the various social strategies people have used to create ties between groups and to defuse tensions among hunter-gatherers.

Marriage is a social invention, unique to humans. Of the hundreds of theories, stories, and fables explaining its origins, my favorite is a Blackfoot Indian tale recorded in 1911. I love this story not because I think it's any "truer" than the others but because it makes such a wonderful change from the equally fanciful theories most of us were taught in high school and college during the 1950s and 1960s. Before marriage was invented, according to the Piegan, or Blackfoot Indians:

> The men and women of the ancient Piegans did not live about together in the beginning. The women . . . made buffalo corrals. Their lodges were fine. . . . They tanned the buffalo-hides, those were their robes. They would cut the meat in slices. In summer they picked berries. They used those in winter. Their lodges all were fine inside. And their things were just as fine. . . . Now, the men were . . . very poor. . . . They had no lodges. They wore raw-hides. . . . They did not know, how they should make lodges. They did not know, how they should tan the buffalo-hides. They did not know, too, how they should cut dried meat, how they should sew their clothes.[1]

In the Blackfoot legend, it was the men, not the women, who needed marriage. Hungry and cold, the men followed the women and found out where they lived. Then they gathered on a nearby hill and waited patiently until the women decided to choose husbands and allow them into their lodges. The female chief selected her mate first, and the rest of the women followed suit.

This is only a folktale, of course, but it is no further off the mark than the story that some anthropologists and sociobiologists have told for years. Before marriage was invented, according to an Anglo-American anthropological theory,

> The men hunted wild animals and feasted on their meat. Their brains became very large because they had to cooperate with each other in the hunt. They stood upright, made tools, built fires, and invented language. Their cave art was very fine. . . . But the women were very poor. They were tied down by childbearing, and they did not know how to get food for themselves or their babies. They did not know how to protect themselves from predators. They did not know, too, how to make tools, produce art, and build lodges or campfires to keep themselves warm.

In this story, as in the Blackfoot tale, the invention of marriage supplies the happy ending for the hapless sex. Here, however, women were the weaker gender. They initiated marriage by offering to trade sex for protection and food. Instead of the men waiting patiently on the hill for the women to pick their mates, the men got to pick the women, and the strongest, most powerful males got first choice. Then the men set their women up by the hearth to protect them from predators and from rival males.

The story that marriage was invented for the protection of women is still the most widespread myth about the origins of marriage. According to the protective or provider theory of marriage, women and infants in early human societies could not survive without men to bring them the meat of woolly mammoths and protect them from marauding saber-toothed tigers and from other men seeking to abduct them. But males were willing to protect and provide only for their "own" females and offspring they had good reason to believe were theirs, so a woman needed to find and hold on to a strong, aggressive mate.

One way a woman could hold a mate was to offer him exclusive and frequent sex in return for food and protection. According to the theory, that is why women lost the estrus cycle that is common to other mammals, in which females come into heat only at periodic intervals. Human females became sexually available year-round, so they were able to draw men into long-term relationships. In anthropologist Robin Fox's telling of this story, "The females could easily trade on the male's tendency to want to monopolize (or at least think he was monopolizing) the females for mating purposes, and say, in effect 'okay, you get the monopoly . . . and we get the meat.'"[2]

The male willingness to trade meat for sex (with the females throwing in whatever nuts and berries they'd gathered to sweeten

the deal) was, according to Fox, "the root of truly human society." Proponents of this protective theory of marriage claim that the nuclear family, based on a sexual division of labor between the male hunter and the female hearth keeper, was the most important unit of survival and protection in the Stone Age.

People in the mid-twentieth century found this story persuasive because it closely resembled the male breadwinner/female homemaker family to which they were accustomed. The male breadwinner model of marriage, as we shall see later, was a late and relatively short-lived way of organizing gender roles and dividing work in human history. But in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s most people believed it was the natural and "traditional" family form.

In 1975, sociobiologist E. O. Wilson drew a direct line from the male hunter marriages that he imagined had prevailed on the African savanna at the dawn of human history to the marriages he observed in the jungle of Wall Street: "During the day the women and children remain in the residential area while the men forage for game or its symbolic equivalent in the form of money."[3] The protective theory is still periodically recycled to explain why women are supposedly attracted to powerful, dominant men, while men seek younger women who will be good breeders and hearth keepers.

But since the 1970s other researchers have poked holes in the protective theory of marriage. Some denied that male dominance and female dependence came to us from our primate ancestors. Among baboons, they pointed out, a female who pairs up with a male does not get more access to food than females outside such a relationship. Among chimpanzees, most food sharing occurs between mothers and their offspring, not between male and female sexual partners. Adult female chimps give food to other females (even unrelated ones) just as often as males give food to females, and female chimps are often more protective of other females than males are. A female chimp who wants food from a male may make sexual overtures, or a male chimp who has meat to spare may use it as a bargaining chip. But males cannot control the sexual behavior of the estrus females. And when members of the group, male or female, want food from a female, they hold or play with her infant, in effect offering babysitting for handouts.[4]

Studies of actual human hunting and gathering societies also threw doubt on the male provider theory. In such societies, women's foraging, not men's hunting, usually contributes the bulk of the group's food. The only exceptions to this rule are Eskimo and other herding or hunting peoples in areas where extremely hostile climates make foraging for plants difficult.[5]

Nor are women in foraging societies tied down by child rearing. One anthropologist, working with an African hunter-gatherer society during the 1960s, calculated that an adult woman typically walked about twelve miles a day gathering food, and brought home anywhere from fifteen to thirty-three pounds. A woman with a child under two covered the same amount of ground and brought back the same amount of food while she carried her child in a sling, allowing the child to nurse as the woman did her foraging. In many societies women also participate in hunting, whether as members of communal hunting parties, as individual hunters, or even in all-female hunting groups.

Today most paleontologists reject the notion that early human societies were organized around dominant male hunters providing for their nuclear families. For one thing, in the early phases of hominid and human evolution, hunting big game was less important for group survival than were gathering plants, bird eggs, edible insects, and shellfish, trapping the occasional small animal, and scavenging the meat of large animals that had died of natural causes.

When early humans began to hunt large animals, they did so by driving animals over cliffs or into swamps. These activities involved the whole group, women as well as men. That is what happens in the surrounds conducted by modern-day foragers, where the entire band encircles the game and gradually herds it into a trap.[6]

We cannot know for sure how the earliest hominids and humans organized their reproduction and family lives. But there are three general schools of thought on the subject. Some researchers believe that early humans lived in female-centered groups made up of mothers, sisters, and their young, accompanied by temporary male companions. Younger males, they suggest, left the group when they reached mating age. Other scholars argue that the needs of defense would have encouraged the formation of groups based on male kin, in which fathers, brothers, and sons, along with their female mates, stayed together. In this view, the female offspring rather than males left the group at puberty. A third group of researchers theorizes that hominid groups were organized around one male mating with several females and traveling with them and their offspring.[7]

But none of these three theories, not even the male with his harem, suggests that an individual male provided for "his" females and children or that the male–female pair was the fundamental unit of economic survival and cooperation. No one could have survived very long in the Paleolithic world if individual nuclear families had had to take primary responsibility for all food production, defense, child rearing, and elder care.[8]

A division of labor between males and females certainly developed fairly early and was reinforced when groups developed weapons effective enough to kill moving animals from a distance. Such weapons made it possible for small groups to hunt solitary, fast-moving animals. Hunting with projectile weapons became the domain of men, partly because it was hard for women to chase swift game while they were nursing. So wherever humans organized small hunting parties that left the main camp, they were likely to be all or mostly male. However, this did not make women dependent upon their individual mates.

Women, keeping their children near, were more likely to specialize in gathering and processing plants and shellfish, manufacturing clothing, trapping small animals, and making digging or cooking implements. This gender specialization led to greater interdependence between males and females. As these productive techniques became more complicated, people had to invest more time in teaching them to children, providing an incentive for couples to stay together for longer stretches.

Having a flexible, gender-based division of labor within a mated pair was an important tool for human survival. One partner, typically the female, could concentrate on the surer thing, finding food through foraging or digging. The other partner could try for a windfall, hunting for food that would be plentiful and filling if it could be caught. Yet this division of labor did not make nuclear families self-sufficient. Collective hunting and gathering remained vital to survival.[9]

Couples in the Paleolithic world would never have fantasized about running off by themselves to their own little retreats in the forest. No Stone Age lovers would have imagined in their wildest dreams that they could or should be "everything" to each other. That way lay death.

Until about twelve thousand years ago, say archaeologists Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, nearly all human societies were comprised of bands of mobile hunter-gatherers who moved seasonally between different sleeping camps and work sites, depending on the weather and food supply. Humans lived in these band-level societies and small, semipermanent hamlets far longer than the few millennia they have lived in more complex villages, cities, states, and empires.[10]

Reconstructions by archaeologists suggest that bands were made up of anywhere from a handful to as many as a hundred people, but commonly numbered around two dozen. Bands lived off the land, using simple tools to process a wide range of animals and plants for food, medicines, clothing, and fuel. They typically moved back and forth over a home territory until resources were depleted or other environmental changes spurred them to move on. Periodically they might travel longer distances to find valued raw materials and take advantage of seasonal game or fish runs.[11]

Sometimes the band would break down into individual family groups that foraged alone. But the archaeological record shows that families regularly came back to a main camp, or hooked up with a new one, for protection and to cooperate in communal hunts. Regional networks of camps routinely came together at water holes or to collectively exploit fish runs or seasonally abundant plants. During those times, dances, festivals, and other rituals took place, building connections between families and bands that were dispersed for much of the year. On such occasions, people might seek mates—or change them—from within the larger groups.

No one suggests that prehistoric bands existed in utopian harmony. But social interactions were governed by the overwhelming need to pool and share resources. The band's mobility made it impractical for people to accumulate significant surpluses, which would have to be lugged from place to place. In the absence of money and nonperishable wealth, the main currency in nomadic foraging societies would have been favors given and owed. Sharing beyond the immediate family or local group was a rudimentary form of banking. It allowed people to accumulate personal credit or goodwill that could be drawn on later.[12]

Using computer simulations and mathematical calculations to compare the outcome of different ways of organizing the production and consumption of food, economic anthropologist Bruce Winterhalder has established the decisive importance of prehistoric sharing. His calculations show that because the results of hunting and gathering varied on a daily basis, the surest way for individuals to minimize the risk of not having enough to eat on a bad day was not to save what they gathered or killed on good days for later use by their "own" nuclear family, but to pool and divide the whole harvest among the entire group every day.[13]

With few exceptions, hunting and gathering societies throughout history have emphasized sharing and reciprocity. Band-level societies put extraordinary time and energy into establishing norms of sharing. People who share gain status, while individuals who refuse to share are shunned and ostracized. Ethnographer Lorna Marshall reports that for the Dobe !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Africa, "the idea of eating alone and not sharing is shocking. . . . It makes them shriek with uneasy laughter." They think that "lions could do that, not men." In seventeenth-century America, William Penn marveled that the Indians always redistributed the gifts or trade goods that European settlers brought, rather than keep them for their own families. "Wealth circulateth like the Blood," he wrote. "All parts partake."[14]

Many simple hunting and gathering societies place so much emphasis on sharing that a person who kills an animal gets no more of its meat than do his companions. A review of twenty-five hunting and gathering societies found that in only three did the hunter get the largest share of his kill. In most, the hunter was obliged to share the meat equally with other camp members, and in a few he got less than he distributed to others. Anthropologist Polly Wiessner observes that these customs create total interdependence among families: "[T]he hunter spends his life hunting for others, and others spend their lives hunting for him."[15]

The idea that in prehistoric times a man would spend his life hunting only for the benefit of his own wife and children, who were dependent solely upon his hunting prowess for survival, is simply projection of 1950s marital norms onto the past. The male/female pair was a good way to organize sexual companionship, share child rearing, and divide daily work. A man who was a skilled hunter might have been an attractive mate, as would have been a woman who was skilled at foraging or making cooking implements, but marrying a good hunter was not the main way that a woman and her children got access to food and protection.

Marriage was certainly an early and a vitally important human invention. One of its crucial functions in the Paleolithic era was its ability to forge networks of cooperation beyond the immediate family group or local band. Bands needed to establish friendly relations with others so they could travel more freely and safely in pursuit of game, fish, plants, and water holes or move as the seasons changed. Archaeologist Brian Hayden argues that hunter-gatherers of the past used a combination of five strategies to create such ties with other groups and to defuse tensions: frequent informal visits, interband sharing, gift giving, periodic large gatherings for ritual occasions, and the establishment of marriage and kinship ties.[16]

All these customs built goodwill and established social networks beyond a single camp or a group of families. But

using marriage to create new ties of kinship was an especially powerful way of binding groups together because it produced children who had relatives in both camps. The Maori of New Zealand say that "a gift connection may be severed, but not so a human link."[17]

However, a kin group that sent its daughters or sons to other groups as marriage partners also needed to make sure that it received spouses in return. Moreover, to create lasting links among groups, the exchange of spouses had to be renewed in later generations.

Sometimes such marriage exchanges would be very direct and immediate, a sister from one group being exchanged for a sister from the other. The exchange need not occur simultaneously, as long as the obligation to pay back one person with another was acknowledged. In other cases, spouses were not exchanged directly. Instead several lineages or clans would be linked in a pattern in which the sisters always married in one direction around the circle while the brothers always married in the opposite one. Lineage A would send its sisters and daughters as wives to lineage B, which sent wives to C, which sent them to A. As practiced among one present-day hunter-gatherer group, the Murngin of Australia, the circle of wife exchange takes seven generations to complete.[18]

Some people believe that from the very beginning, marriage alliances led to strict controls over a young person's choice of mates, especially a woman's. Among the Aborigines of Australia, one of the few places where hunter-gatherer societies lived completely untouched by contact with other societies for thousands of years, marriages were traditionally arranged when girls were still in their childhood and were strictly controlled by elders. Because of the scarcity of food and water in that harsh environment and the need to travel over long distances to ensure survival, Aboriginal elders had to ensure that their community's children were distributed in ways that gave the community family connections to the land and resources wherever they traveled. No rebellion against this system was tolerated.[19]

But the Indians of northeastern North America, who also lived for thousands of years in a "pristine" setting similar to the environment in which many of our Stone Age ancestors operated, traditionally took a very different approach toward marriage, divorce, and sexual activity from that of the Australian Aborigines. Among the Chippewyan people of Canada, the main function of marriage was also to build far-flung personal networks that gave people access to hunting, natural resources, or water holes in other regions. But in this more forgiving environment, individuals tended to make their own marital choices, and no one interfered if a couple decided to part.[20]

Nevertheless, many people argue that marriage originated as a way of exchanging women. Marriage alliances, the eminent anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss declared, were "not established between men and women, but between men by means of women." Women were merely the vehicle for establishing this relationship.[21]

In the 1970s several feminist researchers built on this idea to turn the protective theory of marriage on its head. They suggested that marriage originated not to protect women but to oppress them. These researchers argued that because women probably played a leading role in the invention of agriculture through their experimentation with plants and food preservation, and because women were certainly responsible for the physical reproduction of the group, the origins of marriage lay not in the efforts of women to attract protectors and providers but in the efforts of men to control the productive and reproductive powers of women for their own private benefit.[22]

According to this oppressive theory, men coerced women into marriage, often using abduction, gang rape, or wife beating to enforce their will. Brothers essentially traded their sisters for wives. Fathers gained power in the community by passing their daughters out to young men, who gave the fathers gifts and services in return. Rich men accumulated many wives, who worked for them and bore more daughters who could be exchanged to place other men in their debt.

Like the protective theory of marriage, the oppressive theory still has defenders. Philosopher Iris Marion Young maintains that the historical function of marriage was "to use women as a means of forging alliances among men and perpetuating their 'line.'" Even today, Young says, marriage is "the cornerstone of patriarchal power." Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard argue that marriage is one of the primary ways that "men benefit from, and exploit, the work of women."[23]

In today's political climate, in which men's power over their wives and daughters has greatly diminished, it is tempting to write off the oppressive theory of marriage as a product of 1970s feminist excesses. But there is strong historical evidence that in many societies marriage was indeed a way that men put women's labor to their private use. We can watch this process develop as recently as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries among the Plains Indians.

In the Blackfoot legend about the origins of marriage, the men got dried meat and berries, warm robes, soft moccasins, and fine lodges only after the women chose to take them as husbands. In real life, men began to accumulate buffalo hides, large lodges, and other "fine" things, including, often, more than one wife, in a process that involved far less female choice.

Before the Europeans introduced the horse to the western United States, the Blackfoot and other Plains Indians hunted buffalo on foot, using surrounds. The entire group—men, women, and children—took part in driving the animals into traps or over cliffs. The men clubbed the buffalo to death, and the women dried the meat and tanned the hides. Although the men took on the more risky, up-close killing tasks, the work was evenly divided, and it was episodic; a good hunt could provide meat and clothes for a long time.[24]

But once Europeans introduced the horse, the gun, and the fur trade to North America, everything changed. Indian men were able to hunt buffalo individually. They had both the opportunity and incentive to kill more buffalo than they needed for their own subsistence because they could trade their surplus to whites for personal gain. This hugely increased the number of hides to be tanned and the amount of meat to be dried. The most successful hunters could now kill far more buffalo than one wife could process, and having more wives suddenly meant having more wealth. Richer men began to accumulate wives by offering horses to girls' fathers.

The expansion of the trade in buffalo hides brought a sharp increase in the number of wives per hunter. It also caused the age of marriage for women to drop to preadolescence, and it greatly multiplied social restrictions upon wives. According to nineteenth-century observers, the practice of keeping multiple wives was most common among groups that traded with the fur companies, and in these groups women's labor was much more intensive. These tribes too were more likely to practice forms of punishment such as cutting off a woman's nose for adultery.[25]

There are many other examples of societies in which men have exchanged women without consulting them and in which husbands have used the labor of their wives and children to produce surpluses that increased the men's prestige and power. It is also true that many more societies exchange women in marriage than exchange men, and there are some disadvantages to being the sex that moves after marriage. But in small-scale societies these disadvantages were not necessarily severe. Women could return home to their parents or call on their brothers for protection. Furthermore, in some societies men were the ones who moved at marriage. In these cases, one could just as easily argue that men were being exchanged by women.

In a current example, the Minangkabau of Indonesia, where marriage perpetuates the female line, refer to a husband as "the borrowed man." In traditional Hopi Indian marriages, a woman's kin made "a ceremonial presentation of cornmeal to the groom's household, conceptualized by the Hopi as 'paying for him.'" There is evidence that marriage systems in which men rather than women were circulated may have been more common in kinship societies of the distant past than in those observed over the past several hundred years.[26]

Even in cultures where women move at marriage, there has always been a huge variation in how much male dominance accompanies this arrangement. There are also enough exceptions to the practice of controlling women through marriage to call the oppressive theory into question. In the early eighteenth century a French baron, traveling among hunting and gathering peoples in what is now Canada, was scandalized to find that native parents believed "their Daughters have the command of their own Bodies and may dispose of their Persons as they think fit; they being at liberty to do what they please."[27]

In many hunting and gathering and simple horticultural societies, parents are likely to arrange a first marriage. They may even force a woman into a match. However, in most societies without extensive private property, marriages tend to be fragile, and women whose families have arranged their marriages frequently leave their husbands or run off with lovers without suffering any reprisals.[28]

I do not believe, then, that marriage was invented to oppress women any more than it was invented to protect them. In most cases, marriage probably originated as an informal way of organizing sexual companionship, child rearing, and the daily tasks of life. It became more formal and more permanent as groups began to exchange spouses over larger distances. There was nothing inherent in the institution of marriage that protected women and children from violence or produced the fair and loving relationships that many modern couples aspire to. But there was also nothing inherent in the institution of marriage, as there was, say, in slavery, that required one group to subordinate another. The effect of marriage on people's individual lives has always depended on its functions in economic and social life, functions that have changed immensely over time.

It is likely that our Stone Age ancestors varied in their behaviors just as do the hunting and gathering societies observed in more recent times. But in early human societies, marriage was primarily a way to extend cooperative relations and circulate people and resources beyond the local group. When people married into new groups, it turned strangers into relatives and enemies into allies.

That changed, however, as societies developed surpluses and became more sedentary, populous, and complex.[29] As kin groups began to assert permanent rights over territory and resources, some families amassed more goods and power than others. When that happened, the wealthier families lost interest in sharing resources, pooling labor, or developing alliances with poorer families. Gradually marriage exchanges became a way of consolidating resources rather than creating a circle of reciprocal obligations and connections.

With the growth of inequality in society, the definition of an acceptable marriage narrowed. Wealthy kin groups refused to marry with poorer ones and disavowed any children born to couples whose marriage they hadn't authorized. This shift constituted a revolution in marriage that was to shape people's lives for thousands of years. Whereas marriage had once been a way of expanding the number of cooperating groups, it now became a way for powerful kin groups to accumulate both people and property.

The Transformation of Marriage in Ancient Societies

Wherever this evolution from foraging bands to sedentary agriculturalists occurred, it was accompanied by a tendency to funnel cooperation and sharing exclusively through family ties and kinship obligations and to abandon more informal ways of pooling or sharing resources. In the American Southwest we can trace this transition through changes in architectural patterns. Originally surplus grains were stored in communal spaces in open, visible parts of the village. Later, storage rooms were enclosed within individual residences and could be entered only from the rooms where the family or household actually lived. Surpluses had become capital to be closely guarded, with access restricted to family members.[30]

As some kin groups became richer than others, they sought ways to enhance their own status and to differentiate themselves from "lesser" families. Excavations of ancient living sites throughout the world show growing disparities in the size and quality of dwellings, as well as in the richness of the objects buried with people.

Greater economic differentiation reshaped the rules of marriage. A kin group or lineage with greater social status and

material resources could demand a higher "price" for handing over one of its children in marriage. Within the leading lineages, young men often had to borrow from their seniors in order to marry, increasing the control of elders over junior men as well as over women. A lineage that couldn't pay top prices for spouses had to drop out of the highest rungs of the marriage exchange system. Sometimes a poorer lineage would forgo the bridewealth a groom's family traditionally paid and give its daughters away as secondary wives or concubines to the leading lineages, in order to forge even a second-class connection with a leading family. But in other cases, lower-status kin groups were not allowed to intermarry with those of higher status under any circumstances.[31]

As dominant kin groups became more wealthy and powerful, they married in more restricted circles. Sometimes they even turned away from exogamy (the practice of marrying out of the group) and engaged in endogamy (marriage with close kin), in order to preserve and consolidate their property and kin members.[32] The more resources were at stake in marriage alliances, the more the relatives had an interest in whom their kin married, whether a marriage lasted, and whether a second marriage, which might produce new heirs to complicate the transmission of property, could be contracted if the first one ended.

In many ancient agricultural societies, if an heir was already in place and the birth of another child would complicate inheritance and succession, a woman might be forced to remain single and celibate after her husband's death. In a few cultures the ideal was for a widow to kill herself after her husband died.[33] More often, the surviving spouse was required to marry another member of the deceased's family in order to perpetuate the alliance between the two kin groups.

In India, early law codes provided that a widow with no son had to marry her husband's brother, in order to produce a male child to carry on his lineage. The Old Testament mentions several examples of the same custom. Indeed, it seems to have been preferred practice among the ancient Hebrews. A man who refused to marry his brother's widow had to go through a public ceremony of halizah, or "unshoeing." This passage from the Torah shows how intense the social pressure was against making such a choice: "Then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, so shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother's house. And his name shall be called in Israel the house of him that hath his shoe loosed."[34]

As marriage became the primary vehicle for transmitting status and property, both men and women faced greater restrictions on their behavior. Men, like women, could be forced to marry women chosen by their parents. But because women could bear a child with an "impure" bloodline, introducing a "foreign interest" into a family, their sexual behavior tended to be more strictly supervised, and females were subject to severe penalties for adultery or premarital sex. The laws and moral codes of ancient states exhorted men to watch carefully over their wives "lest the seed of others be sown on your soil."[35]

Distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate children became sharper in all the early states. Children born into unauthorized liaisons could not inherit land, titles, or citizenship rights and so in many cases were effectively condemned to slavery or starvation.

The subordination of wives in the ancient world was exacerbated by the invention of the plow. Use of the plow diminished the value of women's agricultural labor, because plowing requires greater strength than women were believed to have and is less compatible with child care than gardening with a hoe. Husbands began to demand dowries instead of giving bridewealth for wives, and daughters were devalued to the point that families sometimes resorted to female infanticide. The spread of warfare that accompanied the emergence of early states also pushed women farther down in the hierarchy.[36]

As societies became more complex and differentiated, upper classes sometimes displayed their wealth by adopting standards of beauty or behavior that effectively hobbled women. Restrictive clothing, heavy jewelry, or exceedingly long fingernails, for example, made a public statement that the family had slaves to do the work once done by wives and daughters. By the second millennium B.C. the practice of secluding women in special quarters had become widespread in the Middle East. This was done not just to guard their chastity but to signify that a family had so much wealth that its women did not even have to leave the home.

Much later, in China, binding the feet of young girls became a symbol of prestige. Upper-class girls had their feet bound so tightly that the small bones broke and the feet were permanently bowed over, making it excruciatingly painful to walk.[37]

In many societies, elaborate ideologies of purity grew up around the women of the highest-ranking classes. A man who courted a high-ranking woman outside regular channels faced harsh sanctions or even death, while women who stepped out of their assigned places in the marriage market were severely punished.

Assyrian laws from the twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C. guarded women's premarital virginity and condemned to death married women who committed adultery. Married women were required to wear veils, but concubines were forbidden to do so. A man who wanted to raise the status of his concubine and make her his wife could have her veiled. But a woman who veiled herself without the authority of a propertied husband was to be flogged fifty times, have tar poured over her head, and have her ears cut off.[38]

Women's bodies came to be regarded as the properties of their fathers and husbands. Assyrian law declared: "A man may flog his wife, pluck her hair, strike her and mutilate her ears. There is no guilt." The Old Testament suggests that a bride whose virginity was not intact could be stoned to death.[39]

Centuries later in China, Confucius defined a wife as "someone who submits to another." A wife, according to Confucian philosophy, had to follow "the rule of the three obediences: while at home she obeys her father, after marriage she obeys her husband, after he dies she obeys her son."[40]

But men too faced new controls over their personal behavior. If a woman could no longer choose her mate, this also meant that a man could not court a wife on his own initiative but needed to win her father's permission. And in many states, the confinement of wives to household activities "freed" their

husbands to be drafted into the army or dragooned into back-breaking labor on huge public works projects.[41]

By the time we have written records of the civilizations that arose in the ancient world, marriage had become the way most wealth and land changed hands. Marriage was also the main vehicle by which leading families expanded their social networks and political influence. It even sealed military alliances and peace treaties.

With so much at stake, it is hardly surprising that marriage became a hotbed of political intrigue. Families and individuals developed elaborate strategies to create unions that furthered their interests and to block marriages that might benefit their rivals. Elites jockeyed to acquire powerful in-laws. If, after they had agreed to seal a match, a better one presented itself, they maneuvered (and sometimes murdered) to get out of the old one.

Commoners could no longer hope to exchange marriage partners with the elites. At best they might hope to have one of their children marry up. Even this became more difficult as intricate distinctions were created between the rights of primary wives, secondary wives, and concubines. Formal rules detailed what kinds of marriage could and could not produce legitimate heirs. In some places authorities prohibited lower-class groups from marrying at all or made it illegal for individuals from different social classes to wed each other.

The right to decide who could marry whom had become an extremely valuable political and economic weapon and remained so for thousands of years. From the Middle Eastern kingdoms that arose three thousand years before the birth of Christ to the European ones fifteen hundred years later, factions of the ruling circles fought over who had the right to legitimize marriages or authorize divorces. These battles often changed the course of history.

For millennia, the maneuvering of families, governing authorities, and social elites prevailed over the individual desires of young people when it came to selecting or rejecting marriage partners. It was only two hundred years ago that men and women began to wrest control over the right to marry from the hands of parents, church, and state. And only in the last hundred years have women had the independence to make their marital choices without having to bow to economic need and social pressure.

Have we come full circle during the past two centuries, as the power of kin, community, and state to arrange, prohibit, and interfere in marriages has waned? Legal scholar Harry Willekins argues that in most modern industrial societies, marriages are contracted and dissolved in ways that have more in common with the habits of some egalitarian band-level societies than the elaborate rules that governed marriage in more complex societies over the past 5,000 years.[42] In many contemporary societies, there is growing acceptance of premarital sex, divorce, and remarriage, along with an erosion of sharp distinctions between cohabitation and marriage and between "legitimate" and out-of-wedlock births.

Some people note this resemblance between modern family relations and the informal sexual and marital norms of many band-level societies and worry that we are throwing away the advantages of civilization. They hope to reinstitutionalize marriage as the main mechanism that regulates sexuality, legitimizes children, organizes the division of labor between men and women, and redistributes resources to dependents. But the last century of social change makes this highly unlikely. Yet if it is unrealistic to believe we can reimpose older social controls over marriage, it is also naive to think we can effortlessly revive the fluid interpersonal relationships that characterized simpler cultures. In hunting and gathering bands and egalitarian horticultural communities, unstable marriages did not lead to the impoverishment of women or children as they often do today. Unmarried women participated in the work of the group and were entitled to a fair share, while children and other dependents were protected by strong customs that mandated sharing beyond the nuclear family.

This is not the case today, especially in societies such as the United States, where welfare provisions are less extensive than in Western Europe. Today's winner-take-all global economy may have its strong points, but the practice of pooling resources and sharing with the weak is not one of them. The question of how we organize our personal rights and obligations now that our older constraints are gone is another aspect of the contemporary marriage crisis.

Critical Thinking

1. Explain why the story that marriage was invented for the protection of women was such a persuasive theory in the mid-twentieth century. In what ways have researchers poked holes in this theory?
2. What have been the three general schools of thought on how the earliest hominids and humans organized their reproduction and family lives?
3. How does the author characterize early hunter-gatherer societies and their gender-based division of labor and why?
4. What were such societies like, according to reconstructions by archaeologists?
5. Discuss the importance of prehistoric sharing. How is this contrary to the 1950s marital norms?
6. Why was marriage "an early and a vitally important human invention"?
7. According to archaeologist Brian Hayden, what were the five strategies used to create ties with groups and to defuse tensions?
8. Be familiar with some of the means by which marriage became an especially powerful way of binding groups together.
9. Discuss the "oppressive theory" as to the origin of marriage and the evidence provided by the author to contradict it.
10. How did the development of surpluses and a more sedentary life-style change the function of marriage?
11. How did greater economic differentiation reshape the rules of marriage, inheritance, and sexual behavior?
12. How was the subordination of wives in the ancient world exacerbated by the invention of the plow?