

[*Marriage and Caste in America*,
Kay S. Hymowitz, Ivan R. Dee,
192 pages]

Mind the Marriage Gap

By Cheryl Miller

"IF THERE'S ONE THING men fear it's a woman who uses her critical faculties," complains Maureen Dowd in her most recent book on gender relations and, specifically, the question of why men are mysteriously turned off by a certain red-headed bombshell who just happens to have won a Pulitzer. It's a familiar cultural trope: the chauvinist pig in a pinstripe suit who prefers the secretary to the ball-busting career woman.

So dire are the career woman's marriage prospects, supposedly, that *Newsweek* reported in an infamous 1986 cover story that she was more likely to get killed by a terrorist than walk down the aisle. Though *Newsweek* recently retracted the story, the terrifying statistic found its way into pop culture, where it fueled the angst and anxieties of millions of single women. Popular series such as "Sex and the City" and "Ally McBeal" captured the zeitgeist with their free-spirited, successful heroines who were nevertheless desperate to land a man.

But for all the hand-wringing, the premise wasn't true. Women with college degrees—or even a graduate or professional degrees—were still settling down even as they chased after careers. Nor were these women more likely to divorce or enter Murphy Brown-style single motherhood. Just the opposite was true: they were more likely to marry and less likely to divorce or become single mothers than their undereducated sisters. The self-styled revolutionaries most eager to escape the demands of family life turned out to be more traditional in their personal lives than the supposedly conventional poor and uneducated proles.

This surprising contradiction is the subject of Kay Hymowitz's *Marriage and Caste in America*. Drawing from essays she wrote for *City Journal*, the Manhattan Institute fellow explores the consequences of this "marriage gap" between rich and poor—how it has exacerbated inequality and condemned legions of women and children to poverty.

Beginning in 1960, Hymowitz writes, America underwent an "unmarriage revolution." The divorce and nonmarital birthrates soared across class lines. But around 1980, these trends began to diverge for the upper and lower classes. Both the divorce rate and out-of-wedlock birthrate for upper-class women leveled and then fell in the 1990s. The divorce rate also fell for lower-class women—but only because so few were marrying in the first place. With the decline in the marriage rate, the out-of-wedlock birthrate increased so that by 2005, 52 percent of nonmarital births were to women without a high-school diploma, compared to only 9 percent to women with a graduate or professional degree. The unmarriage revolution has been particularly devastating among African-Americans and, more recently, among Hispanics. More than two-thirds of black children and nearly half of Hispanic children are born out of wedlock.

As mountains of social-science data make clear, children raised in single-mother homes suffer in comparison to children raised by both biological parents, according to practically every social indicator. Even controlling for parental income and education, these children are twice as likely to drop out of high school and more likely to experiment with drugs and abuse alcohol, be incarcerated, and have behavioral or psychological problems. Worse still, they are more likely to remain unwed themselves and have children outside of marriage, thereby continuing the cycle for yet another generation. As a consequence of the marriage gap, America is on the verge of becoming a nation of "separate and unequal families" divided between "a comfortable, self-perpetuat-

ing middle class" and "a self-perpetuating single-mother proletariat."

There's no question that marriage confers material benefits. Thirty-six percent of female-headed families are below the poverty line, while only 6 percent of married-couple families are. Yet more important, Hymowitz argues, is the "human capital" marriage offers. By providing a "life script" for men and women, marriage nurtures the values—self-control, responsibility, prudence—that enable people to thrive in the new knowledge economy. Marriage orients men and women toward the future and makes the choice of a spouse with whom they will create a family an important—if not the most important—decision in their lives. According to Hymowitz, "A marriage orientation—not just marriage itself—is part and parcel of [their] bourgeois ambition."

This bourgeois ambition manifests itself most clearly in middle- and upper-class couples' devotion to "the Mission": the determined effort of parents to develop their children to fullest potential—or, at the very least, to get them into Harvard. The Mission, Hymowitz admits, can lead to excess. Ask any observer of a middle-class suburban household with its trunks of educational toys, its overscheduled kids running from ballet to piano practice to the evening's soccer game, and the endless college prep that resembles nothing so much as the arms race. But it does get results. One study of students at the nation's top 50 schools found that students from "disrupted families"—that is, families in which children did not grow up with both biological parents—were half as likely to attend a selective college.

Drawing on interviews with inner-city couples in Brooklyn, Hymowitz describes in dispiriting detail just how the other half lives. Family arrangements among these unmarried have-nots are messy and haphazard. Often the men already have children by other women, further straining their latest relationship as the women fight over the man's attention and resources. Few hold down steady jobs, choosing instead to

make a quick buck selling drugs or mooching off their current girlfriends and family. The women are resigned to their partner's infidelities. Of her philandering, controlling boyfriend, Patricia, a young black woman with a two-year-old son, sighs, "I think the fool is just like that. He's never going to change." Or as one woman more succinctly put it: "Motherf---er not faithful."

Many women see single motherhood as a rite of passage, as proof of one's maturity. They take pride in bringing up their children by themselves, on not depending on a man for support or a paycheck. On hip-hop and R&B stations, paeans to female independence and self-reliance abound. "I see ya payin' ya bills, I see ya workin' ya job," enthuses "American Idol" star Fantasia Barrino—herself a teen mother—in her single-mom anthem, "Baby Mama." Likewise, Destiny's Child, the pop trio headed by Beyoncé Knowles, gives props to "all the honeys who makin' money. ... all the mommas who profit dollars" in their hit "Independent Women." Never mind that few of the proud "baby mamas" singing along with Beyoncé can afford basic necessities let alone the "rocks" the diva boasts of buying herself or that despite Barrino's assurance that "we can go anywhere, we can do anything," few teen moms will escape the poverty of the inner city.

So devastating is the portrait Hymowitz paints of the inner city that it's hard to accept the giddy optimism of her last two chapters. "It's morning after in America," Hymowitz exclaims, pointing to surveys showing the return of young Americans to traditional values and the slow slide of the feminist movement into irrelevance. She also makes the rather dubious assertion that American culture is becoming less sexualized. "Miss Prim is in," she declares. (Paris Hilton must not have gotten the memo.)

But how have things improved among the underclass? Not much is the answer. Teen pregnancies have declined but only as pregnancies to single women in their twenties have gone up. And Hymowitz makes no mention of the situation in Hispanic communities, where, as her col-

league Heather MacDonald reports, the out-of-wedlock birthrate is now highest in the country—over three times that of whites and Asians and nearly one and a half times that of black women.

Hymowitz advocates marriage counseling programs and parenting classes for unwed couples. She also argues that schools need to teach young women and men that it's in their self-interest (and their future children's) to postpone childbearing until after marriage. "We haven't appealed to people's rational self-interest," she told the *Wall Street Journal*. "They don't know that they're ... limiting the prosperity of their children's future." This seems likely to meet the same success as one anti-teen pregnancy measure Hymowitz describes in which a school required students to carry around sacks of flour as if they were babies. The next day several of the girls showed up with their sacks clad in newly purchased outfits from Baby Gap.

The problem can't simply be that no one is talking about the "M-word" as Hymowitz claims. Many of Hymowitz's unmarried interviewees cherish white-picket dreams of marriage and children, and more than a few know from bitter experience what it means to grow up without a father. Yet for all their good intentions, they just can't seem to live up to their own ideals.

These couples exhibit what political theorist William A. Galston calls "magical thinking." It's as if they see no connection between their present actions and their future plans. When Hymowitz asks a group of women about their career plans, they answer that they are going to be doctors, lawyers, chefs—much like, Hymowitz notes, a four-year-old says that he wants to be an astronaut when he grows up. Hymowitz then asks the women if they think having a baby will get in the way of their dreams, and the women are adamant: "No. Not at all."

It's not that these couples don't understand the importance of marriage. It's that they lack the life skills to plan for it. Hymowitz may have fallen into the age-old problem of the chicken and the egg. Is the marriage gap the cause—or just a

symptom—of social breakdown among America's working class?

The contrast with Europe is illustrative. Unlike in the U.S., unwed, cohabiting unions in Europe are not associated with higher rates of poverty and family disruption. In fact, although Sweden's out-of-wedlock birthrate is almost double that of the United States, two-thirds of all 15-year-olds live with both of their biological parents—a figure similar to those in France and Germany. If marriage is so important to the cultivation of bourgeois virtues, why haven't Europeans experienced the kind of social dysfunction found in America's inner cities?

With *Marriage and Caste in America*, Hymowitz provides an arresting diagnosis of American social ills. But to find a cure, we'll need to look deeper. ■

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[The American Way of Strategy: U.S. Foreign Policy and the American Way of Life, Michael Lind, Oxford University Press, 304 pages]

Real Kantian

By Michael C. Desch

ACCORDING TO THE New America Foundation's Michael Lind, the "American way of strategy" has consistently provided the United States with the surest means of maintaining our external security without compromising our domestic liberty. "For more than two centuries," he writes, "mainstream American foreign policy has sought to protect two elements of American Republican liberty—the freedom of the American state from other states and the freedom of Americans from their own state—by means of the American way of strategy." No other conceivable grand strategy—not isolationism, offshore balancing, empire, or appease-