

humans are historical beings—contingent and temporary cosmic accidents. Once we see that we, as historical or temporary beings, are defined by death and nothing more, then we are ready to die or disappear as self-conscious beings.

So Rorty and Kojève actually agree: Once we see that everything human is defined by time and chance, we are ready to become nothing more than clever animals. Rorty's polemic against self-consciousness is from the perspective of a wise man who can see through human illusions about God, nature, morality, philosophy, and even history. The real desperation implicit in his strategy here might move us Straussians—who see the dogmatism in what passes for Kojève's historical wisdom—to tell Rorty to lighten up.

He shares the historicist illusion of Nietzsche and Kojève—and, to tell the truth, of some Straussians—that the “last man” is possible. But some of us Straussians see that we have every reason to believe that human nature will triumph, as it has triumphed, over every human effort to eradicate it. We can't really fight or talk or even drug and genetically manipulate the cruelties and

miseries (as well as the joys and greatness) of human self-consciousness away. So we can't help being moved strongly and deeply by love and death.

Rorty's rhetoric or linguistic therapy, in truth, actually makes us more miserable, because it deprives us of the words that correspond to all our experiences without really making the uncomfortable ones go away. Today, bourgeois Americans mouth something like Rorty's platitudes while being more death-obsessed than human beings have ever been. They're obsessed with their bodies because they believe they don't have souls. Their physical comfort and personal freedom are little compensation for the difficulty they have articulating and pursuing the goods that really constitute human life. They try but fail to replace truth with comfort, and so they remain restless and anxious in the midst of their pleasures. We bourgeois Americans are not really much like Nietzsche's last men at all.

Here's Rorty's funniest and most reasonable comment about Kojève: “Redblooded Americans like myself resent Kojève's claim that ‘the final stage of Communism in the postwar

United States does indeed, as it must, reduce man to animality.’ But even apart from his snobby preference for samurai over salespeople, and for Stalin over Eisenhower, Kojève's off-hand nuttiness gets tiresome pretty quickly.” It is, in fact, nutty to say that our salesmen and presidents are no longer human beings—but that's because they do not and cannot consistently prefer comfort to truth. Rorty's remark would be funnier if he himself had said anything good about the opinions of businessmen or Republican presidents, but he has the typical academic progressivist's contempt for the opinions of actual members of our bourgeoisie. Say what you will about us Straussian Republicans, we are willing to defend the somewhat pedestrian but still quite real moral and religious lives of average Americans—including average presidents—against theoretical elitism.

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Book Review by F. Carolyn Graglia

WEDDING BELL BLUES

The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families,
by James Q. Wilson. HarperCollins, 274 pages, \$25.95

IN CONCLUDING HIS EXCELLENT OVERVIEW of the state of marriage and family in America today, social scientist James Q. Wilson wonders why American elite culture appears to prefer a post-marriage society like Sweden, “where unmarried couples care for children and the state pays money to help them do that.” A better model, he suggests, would be Japan, where “shame remains a powerful force for controlling behavior” and “crime, drug abuse, and out-of-wedlock births are all remarkably rare,” while the divorce rate is one-third of ours. Why do so many in our culture willingly embrace liberated cohabitation over committed wedlock? *The Marriage Problem* finds the answer mainly in two factors.

First, the Enlightenment led to a “redefinition of marriage as an agreement between two people with individual rights rather than as a partnership made sacred by law, custom, and God.” In a superb analysis, Wilson traces the rise of modern marriage from medieval times to the present, showing how the fruits of the

Enlightenment have engulfed us. By replacing “a sacrament with a contract and then a contract with an arrangement,” society made marriages weaker and children more vulnerable in today's ubiquitous single-parent families.

The second factor is the effect of slavery. The low marriage rate and high illegitimacy rate among African-Americans today, says Wilson, are partly attributable to the legacy of the African culture from which the slaves came. In this culture, polygyny was common and one's clansmen were more important than one's father, who was often unwed and absent. But Wilson rejects the view of many historians who claim that slavery did not destroy the African-American family. Slavery, he suggests, bears much responsibility for today's serious problem of the “two nations”: in one nation, a child is raised by two parents and in the other, “a child is raised by an unwed girl” and “lives in a neighborhood filled with many sexual men but few committed fathers.”

Whatever the extent of slavery's impact,

the fact remains that although single-parent hood was always more common among blacks than whites, it increased tremendously among blacks, and to a lesser extent among whites, from the 1960s on. The legacy of slavery can hardly have affected blacks more in the 1960s than in the 1880s, and it cannot explain white behavior at all.

Wilson paints a grim picture of marriage and families today: one-half of marriages end in divorce; one-third of children are born out of wedlock; and marriages are declining despite overwhelming evidence that married people are happier, healthier, and wealthier than the unmarried. Contrary to past history, men are refusing to marry the women they impregnate. Among those aged 25-34, “more than two-thirds of all white men and women but less than one-third of black men and women are married,” and “educated, affluent African-American men are no more likely to marry” than poorer ones.

In painting this grim picture, Wilson also unflinchingly states facts that many would like

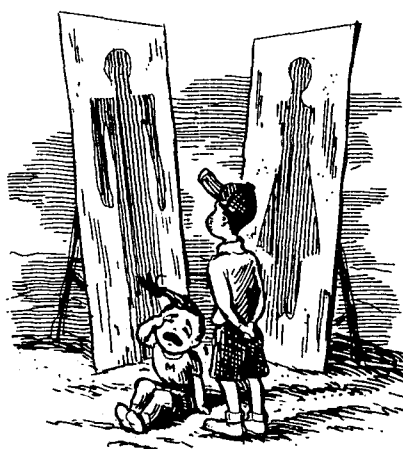
to deny. By numerous measures of well-being, "children in one-parent families are much worse off than those in two-parent families even when both families have the same earnings." The popular 1996 Welfare Reform Act has the drawback of telling "young mothers to be employed, away from their children for much of each week," so that they "will be raised by somebody else" (this is also the fact when any mother enters the workplace). As women "work independently of the family" and "personal income now flows to each working person rather than to one united family," the family "must lose some of its value"; "marriage does not offer much to the father and mother" if children "can be raised by a nanny or a day-care center." "Working women, once married, are more likely to go through a divorce than those not working."

Yet he presents these devastating facts with a seeming sense of resignation, as if he believes we are determined to continue following a path laid out long ago that leads inexorably to a post-marriage society. Our problem, Wilson advises, is "to find a way whereby marriage is restored," but he denies that the government can help much: "That effort must be done retail, not wholesale, by families and churches and neighborhoods and the media, not by tax breaks or government subsidies." Though he's correct that the motivation for change must well up within the culture, accomplishing change often requires reform of the laws that contributed to the problems.

ALTHOUGH WILSON WANTS TO MINIMIZE the effect of the 1960s, our families were far better off in the 1950s than today, and the feminist movement, for one, deserves more immediate blame than Voltaire, although he may be the movement's spiritual forefather. It was feminists who undertook, with great success indeed, to model our country on Sweden, and legislation was an important tool in their quest. Wilson states that feminists gave the enactment of no-fault divorce laws "hardly any notice." In fact, the movement's leaders saw these laws as crucial to achieving their goal of forcing homemakers into the workplace by denying them the social and economic security afforded by strict divorce laws. The staunchest opponents of current efforts to reform no-fault are feminists, who argue that if given a choice to return to a traditional sex role within the family, too many women would make that choice. No-fault must be retained, they insist, to deprive women of that

choice and keep them in the workplace.

Wilson recognizes that the family must protect itself against the fact that the "mother-infant bond will be tighter than the mother-father bond." Past societies provided this protection, he says, "by embedding marriage in an elaborate set of rules designed to protect the fragile parts of marriage from the interests of a wandering male." The most important rules were those making divorce difficult to obtain. Many of Wilson's sources demonstrate that the happiest and longest-lasting marriages are those in which the spouses believe that divorce should be difficult and rare. By enacting strict divorce laws, government teaches its citizens that marriage



should be a permanent commitment, the precise opposite of the lesson taught daily by our current regime of no-fault divorce.

In addition to divorce reform, there are other ways that government can help solve the marriage problem. Through various subsidies, government now encourages use of the paid childcare that feminists advocate. Supporters of traditional families should seek to have any government aid go to all families, not just to those that pay others to care for their children.

Countless other laws, enacted at the behest of feminists, have contributed to the development that is at the root of the marriage problem—the deterioration of males. Lionel Tiger analyses this in his book, *The Decline of Males*, which documents what he identifies as today's pattern of growth in the confidence and power of women and of erosion in the confidence of men. Among the crucial aspects of the decline of men and ascendancy of women that Tiger describes are the facts that more women than men are now completing high school and graduating from college, women as a group are working

more and earning more, and men are working less and earning less. Fostering this decline are laws requiring preferential treatment of women in education, workplaces, the military, and the awarding of government contracts. The decline is promoted also by laws requiring the feminization of our schools and by the perversion of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, in effect promoting elimination of many male athletic teams in high schools and colleges.

FINALLY, AS WILSON EXPLAINS SO WELL, the sex ratio—the number of men per 100 women in a society—is critically important in determining the fate of marriage. A low sex ratio—fewer men than women—causes a decline in marriages insofar as "many women will settle for less than what they had hoped for by never marrying, accepting casual offers of sex from men who offer no marital prospects, or producing babies without being married to their fathers."

This is our situation today. Since women usually marry men who are somewhat older, more educated, and more affluent than they, and since far fewer men are graduating from college or are employed than previously, the sex ratio has dropped significantly. The sex ratio was about 100 in 1940; it was 95 in 1970. But if you confined the population figures to unmarried white men between the ages of 23 and 27 and unmarried white women between the ages of 20 and 24, the sex ratio in 1970 was only 67. In 1950, there were twice as many men as women in college, but in 1997, there were only 79 men for every 100 women. By the time college-educated unmarried white women reach the age of 30, there are only half as many unmarried men of the same age and education. Overall, African-Americans have a lower sex ratio than whites; by 1970, there was about one young black man for every two young black women.

Increasing the ratio is critical to solving the marriage problem. And combating the numerous feminist-initiated attacks on men's social position is crucial to increasing the sex ratio. For those endeavoring to restore marriage—through legislation, when possible—Wilson's thorough and very moving account of today's familial distress and its causes is a welcome source of information and supporting argumentation.

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VANITY OF VANITIES

The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth,
by John R. Schneider. Eerdmans, 233 pages, \$24

YOU WILL NOT FIND THE GOOD OF AFFLUENCE in the self-help section of your local bookstore, next to such titles as *Sex and Longevity* or *Drink to Your Health*. You will find it in the religion section. John Schneider, professor of religion and theology at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, has given us a Biblical study of affluence, and he finds more or less what the man of pious reflection and sound politics might expect.

The book opens with Schneider's discussion of the papal encyclical of 1891, *Rerum Novarum*. This, of course, means "of new things," and the encyclical concludes that industrial society is a wholly new world and therefore Christian economic ethics need to be applied in a holy new way. There are severe problems with the way industrial laborers have been treated by the system, but, despite these problems, the capitalistic system is not an inherent evil but a good thing. As we move on from industrial society to informational society, we get a lot of "new new things," as a popular book called them, that need to be similarly evaluated.

Schneider gives the impression that no wealth was ever really created before 1700. He tells us that the main basis of wealth was land, that when land is the main basis of wealth, "zero-sum" is to a more or less true description of the economic game, and that therefore before 1700 some of the ideas of the religious Left that we hear now might have had a lot more validity: for example, that as long as there are poor around us we shouldn't do certain things like art or national defense; or that the rich, those who have capital or savings, should all divest themselves of it.

Land is in some sense "zero-sum"—they're not making any more of it, except in the Netherlands. But there has been urban economic activity in Europe for almost 900 years, and in some other parts of the world for a lot longer, and to say that it didn't really create wealth seems foolish. Anyone who ever took a tour of the great cities of classical Greece and Rome would see a culture whose affluence was based on trade and not land alone. And besides, they might not be making more land, but they were growing things on it. Plants bear fruit. Livestock reproduce. That's growth! We should be wary of the notion that we are in a new dispensation as far as human nature is concerned.

Leaving behind his *novus ordo seclorum* suggestions, Schneider devotes several chapters to applying the Bible to the human condition. In Genesis, he finds that, contrary to popular claims, monotheism is not responsible for our ecological problems. He finds the Exodus wilderness experience—where there was enough manna for one day at a time—to be a spiritually valuable lesson, but not an economic model. (They were, after all, on their way to Canaan, where there was to be milk and honey instead of manna.)

He reviews Old Testament laws, like gleanings, the poor tithe, etc., and offers an excellent discussion of the Jubilee, the provision by which agricultural land returned to its original owners at the end of 50 years and could not be sold long-term. This has often been thought to be an argument against laissez-faire property rights and for redistribution of wealth. It was actually about maintaining the Holy Land. If the poor person were an Israelite landowner who had fallen on hard times, he benefited from the Jubilee; if he were an alien and stranger in the land, or a permanent slave—categories of people for which Old Testament Law is mostly quite solicitous—he did not benefit from the Jubilee at all and had to surrender such land as he had.

Moving from the Pentateuch to the Prophets, Schneider points out the specific nature of Amos's complaints about his corrupt society.

The political order was a monarchy gone over into tyranny, and the social economy (mainly based on marketing of commodities) was completely under the control of a ruling elite. These rulers of Israel were in the nearly omnipotent position of being able to set rates of taxation, fix prices, and generally bully their way around the economic precincts of the nation.... In a society of this sort power is concentrated in the monarch and it extends only to those who are favorably connected to the throne.

Much of Latin American and other Third World "capitalism" is like this. So are certain heavily regulated businesses, like real estate on the local level, in the United States. An obvious point, and one that Schneider fails to make, is that it is folly to try to trust the government to

be "able to set rates of taxation, fix prices, and generally bully their way around" on behalf of the poor and at the expense of the rich, as the Left tries to do. The inevitable result is not to eliminate the elite, but to create a new one.

"Alas," says Amos,

for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the music of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

But the problem is not affluence. The problem is that they are not grieving over the ruin of "Joseph," i.e., the two predominant tribes of the Samaria region, descended from Joseph. After all, David was not blamed for "improvising on instruments of music."

Proverbs strikes an interesting balance, both affirming that prosperity is often the reward for hard work, and at the same time pointing out that the rich have their problems too. Schneider discusses Proverbs 10:15, "The wealth of the rich is their fortress; the poverty of the poor is their ruin." But there is another verse: "The wealth of the rich is their fortress; they imagine it an unscalable wall." This text seems to be one of the keys to the Bible's understanding of the real spiritual problem of the rich. They see, consciously or unconsciously, their wealth as sheltering them against the problems of the world, rather than seeing God as their protector. Or maybe they do not even know that the problems exist.

SCHNEIDER NOTES THAT SOLOMON ASKED for wisdom, not riches, and that Job did not "plead to God for material wealth, but only for restoration of his integrity. God restores his riches anyway." *The Good of Affluence* invokes Ecclesiastes, too. And I must say, if I were preaching to a roomful of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, or even maybe a Hollywood crowd, I would take that book as my primary text. It was written for people like that.

When he turns to the New Testament, Schneider offers an excellent discussion of Jesus,