"Marriage equality is a threat: to inequality. It's a boon to everyone who values and benefits from equality."

In the following viewpoint, Rebecca Solnit argues that although proponents of same-sex marriage have argued against conservative claims that marriage equality is a threat, it is in fact a threat to inequality between men and women. Solnit contends that traditional marriage is based on hierarchy, with men having power over women. Solnit claims that allowing same-sex couples to marry will upend these entrenched gender roles, helping to create more equality for everyone. Solnit is a writer in San Francisco, California.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. In Great Britain, according to Solnit, property in marriage belonged to the husband until what laws were passed?
2. Feminism has made same-sex marriage possible by doing what, in the author's opinion?
3. What is conservatives' real objection to same-sex marriage, in Solnit's view?

For a long time, the advocates of same-sex marriage have been saying that such unions pose no threat, contradicting the conservatives who say such unions are a threat to traditional marriage. Maybe the conservatives are right, and maybe we should celebrate that threat rather than denying it. The marriage of two men or two women doesn't impact any man-and-woman marriage directly. But metaphorically it could.

The History of Legal Marriage

To understand how, you need to look at what traditional marriage is. And at the ways in which both sides are dissembling: the advocates by denying, or more likely overlooking the threat, and the conservatives by being coy about what it's a threat to.

Recently a lot of Americans have swapped the awkward phrase "same-sex marriage" for the term "marriage equality". The phrase is ordinarily employed to mean that same-sex couples will have the rights different-sexed couples do. But it could also mean that marriage is between equals. That's not what traditional marriage was. Throughout much of its history in the west, the laws defining marriage made the husband essentially an owner and the wife a possession.

The British judge William Blackstone wrote in 1765, "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband ..." Under such rules, a woman's life was dependent on the disposition of her husband, and though there were kind as well as
unkind husbands then, rights are more reliable than the kindness of someone who holds absolute power over you. And rights were a long way off.

Until Britain's Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, everything belonged to the husband; the wife was penniless on her own account, no matter her inheritance or her earnings. Laws against wife beating were passed around that time in both England and the US but rarely enforced until the 1970s. That domestic violence is now prosecuted hasn't cured the epidemic of such violence in both countries.

A Hierarchical Relationship

The novelist Edna O'Brien's recent memoir has some blood-curdling passages about her own journey through what appears to have been a very traditional marriage. Her first husband was withering about her literary success and obliged her to sign over her cheques to him. When she refused to sign over a large film-rights cheque, he throttled her, but when she went to the police they were not much interested. That was a half a century ago, but in the US, a woman is still beaten every nine seconds by an intimate partner or former partner, and about three a day are murdered by that category of guy. The violence horrifies me, but so does the underlying assumption that the abuser has the right to control and punish his victim and the way such violence is used to that end.

The [2013] case in Cleveland, Ohio, of Ariel Castro, accused of imprisoning, torturing and sexually abusing three young women for a decade, is extreme, but it may not be the anomaly it is portrayed as. For one thing, Castro is claimed to have been spectacularly and openly violent to his now-deceased common-law wife. And what lay behind Castro's alleged actions must have been a desire for a situation in which he held absolute power and the women were absolutely powerless, a vicious version of the traditional arrangement.

This is the tradition feminism protested and protests against—not only the extremes but the quotidian [daily] situation. Feminists in the 19th century made some inroads, those of the 1970s and 1980s made a great many more, which every woman in the US and UK [United Kingdom] has benefited from. And feminism made same-sex marriage possible by doing so much to transform a hierarchical relationship into an egalitarian one. Because a marriage between two people of the same gender is inherently egalitarian—one partner may happen to have more power in any number of ways, but for the most part it's a relationship between people who have equal standing and who are free to define their roles themselves.

Gay men and lesbians have already opened up the question of what qualities and roles are male and female in ways that can be liberating for straight people. When they marry, the meaning of marriage is likewise opened up. No hierarchical tradition underlies their union. Some people have greeted this with joy. A Presbyterian pastor who had performed a number of such marriages told me, "I remember coming to this realisation when I was meeting with same-sex couples before performing their ceremonies when it was legal in California. The old patriarchal default settings did not apply in their relationships, and it was a glorious thing to witness."
Equality Frightens Conservatives

American conservatives are frightened by this egalitarianism, or maybe just appalled by it. It's not traditional. But they don't want to talk about that tradition or their enthusiasm for it, though if you follow their assault on reproductive rights, women's rights and, all last winter [2013], renewing the Violence Against Women Act, it's not hard to see where they stand. However, they dissembled on their real interest in stopping same-sex marriage.

Those of us following the court proceedings around, for example, California's marriage-equality battle have heard a lot about how marriage is for the begetting and raising of children, and certainly reproduction requires the union of a sperm and an egg—but those unite in many ways nowadays, including in laboratories and surrogate mothers. And everyone is aware that many children are now raised by grandparents, stepparents, adoptive parents and other people who did not beget but love them.

Many heterosexual marriages are childless; many with children break up: they are no guarantee that children will be raised in a house with two parents of two genders. The courts have scoffed at the reproduction and child-raising argument against marriage equality. And the conservatives have not mounted what seems to be their real objection: that they wish to preserve traditional marriage and more than that preserve traditional gender roles.

A Path to Equality

I know lovely and amazing heterosexual couples who married in the 1940s and 1950s and every decade since. Their marriages are egalitarian, full of mutuality and generosity (and of course I've known nice men married to unbearable human beings too: being a jerk knows no gender, though power relations do, and the law reinforced that until very recently). But even people who weren't particularly nasty were deeply unequal in the past. I also know a decent man who just passed away, aged 91: in his prime he took a job on the other side of the country without informing his wife that she was moving or inviting her to participate in the decision. Her life was not hers to determine. It was his.

It's time to slam the door shut on that era. And to open another door, through which we can welcome equality: between genders, among marital partners, for everyone in every circumstance. Marriage equality is a threat: to inequality. It's a boon to everyone who values and benefits from equality. It's for all of us.

Further Readings

Books
Periodicals


- Romeo Vitelli "Is There Such a Thing as Precarious Manhood?," Psychology Today, June 10, 2013.


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