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Don't blame gay marriage

By: Jennifer Rubin – April 1, 2013

As the country goes through a major cultural, social and legal shift on same-sex marriage there are still conservatives who can't shed their certitude that there must be some deep, dark danger to society from gay couples choosing to cement their bonds. Ross Douthat insists something must be amiss, even though we don't know what that is: "A more honest, less triumphalist case for gay marriage would be willing to concede that, yes, there might be some social costs to redefining marriage. It would simply argue that those costs are too diffuse and hard to quantify to outweigh the immediate benefits of recognizing gay couples' love and commitment."

Now who is being honest and who is fishing for a rationale to oppose marriage? Mind you that we are talking about the difference between *unwed* gay couples and *wed* gay couples. Since heterosexual couples, conservatives have been telling us for years, do better married than not, why would the same not be true of homosexual couples? After all marriage is a conservative institution that promotes reliance on those other than government and property ownership, increases personal happiness and longevity and diminishes promiscuity.

Well Douthat and others argue that somehow gay marriage is responsible in part for all those bad things that have been happening to heterosexual marriage. He tip-toes up to the argument ("As the cause of gay marriage has pressed forward, the social link between marriage and childbearing has indeed weakened faster than before"), and then retreats for lack of evidence. ("Correlations do not, of course, establish causation.")

Let's be clear: Whatever problems heterosexual marriage has been undergoing have their roots in economic, social and cultural changes beginning decades before gay marriage had any public traction.

Women don't decide to postpone marriage because gays are getting married. They do so to advance their careers and because sex has been delinked from marriage.

Rates of divorce aren't spiking because more gays are tying the knot. In a society in which there is little or no social approbation against divorce (the greatest conservative president was divorced) and no perceived economic necessity to marry or remain married, there will be more divorce. (Add in the baby boomer mentality that life is all about self-fulfillment and everyone should refashion themselves to please them, and you'll get a divorce epidemic.)

It is frankly absurd once you spell out the supposed cause and effects to associate these types of marital issues to the boom in gay marriage in the last ten years.

Whatever their pluses and minuses, the pill, women's liberation, the liberal welfare state, the secularization of society and the insatiable materialist thirst that goes with a

consumer-driven society have all taken a toll on marriage. Ten years ago Ramesh Ponnuru could see the handwriting on the wall:

The traditional moral argument against homosexual sex has been part of a larger critique of non-marital sex — and, classically, of sex that is not oriented toward procreation within marriage. Social conservatives need no instruction on how the links among sex, procreation and marriage have been weakened among heterosexuals. They know that many people have adopted what might be called a privatized view of marriage, as an institution whose contours are plastic, whose purpose is to provide emotional satisfaction to the persons concerned, and whose terms are negotiable (and revocable).

In other words, gay marriage is among the symptoms and not the cause of a revolution in perspectives on sex, marriage and religion.

Honestly, we have no hard data about how gay marriage will impact society. But to assume there will be a net negative effect is curious. (As Ponnuru put it, “What, after all, have been gays’ great demands in recent years? They have asked for the opportunity to serve in the armed forces, to lead Boy Scout troops, to marry and adopt. Social-conservative rhetoric on homosexuality remained stuck in the 1970s, presenting gays as sexual radicals. Gays were really the last squares.”)

When faced with failure, as social conservatives certainly are experiencing on gay marriage, it is often helpful to return to first principles. Why is America becoming more secularized? Where did churches and synagogues go wrong in losing their flocks? Is modernity really inconsistent with religion? I suspect if they spent time on those issues rather than railing against the end result of 50-plus years of social change they might be more successful in shoring up marriage and less paranoid about gays emulating an institution which has been a critical element in free, stable and prosperous societies.

UPDATE: David Boaz of the Cato Institute has a smart piece on this subject.