Public Relations: Why the Rush to Same-Sex Marriage? And Who Stands to Benefit?

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I grew up in a world in which girls were less valued than boys. Educating girls was understood to be a wasteful proposition—after all, they would just get married. The only women who did not marry were nuns and dutiful daughters who stayed at home to care for their aging parents. The nuns were another species; the dutiful daughters were home forever was frankly terrifying. But I knew by the time I was ten years old that I did not want to marry.

It took almost another decade before I understood that women could make lives together. (News traveled slowly to isolated山区 in the past.) As soon as I understood that women could make lives together, I began with reference to my own childhood because so many gay marriage advocates begin with the figure of a child. The opening scene of conservative gay journalist Bruce Bawer’s A Place at the Table is, as Warner points out, hard to overlook: “As a boy I was on the verge of shame at—or corruption by—the sexually explicit images he will in any gay publication he has the courage to pick up. As Bawer’s passage indicates, the child in question is invariably male and equally in pain. The child in question must be a boy, and must be in pain, because anti- and pro-gay marriage advocates agree that the goal of marriage is to improve the lives of males, through the civilizational process: that is, the domestication—of men. As Warner notes, the subtitle of legal scholar William Eskridge’s 1996 book, The Case for Same-Sex Marriage: From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment, perfectly captures this assumption. The misery of the gay boy child, with nothing before him but the prospect of a profoundly self-destructive universe gay men naturally inhabit, becomes itself an argument for gay marriage. Marriage will relieve his suffering.

Why the rush to same-sex marriage? And who stands to benefit? Almost all of the contributors to the national media discussion of same-sex marriage have been white, and almost all have been male. As Michel Warner notes, the subtitle of legal scholar Samuel R. Delaney, The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom. New York: Poseidon, 1993.


Thomas Roberts and others.


When Sullivan goes on to insist that “gender differences...are deeper than the differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals,” I have to wonder if the pain and shame of his homosexuality is somehow transferred to everyone else who has been similarly forced into the company of the girl.

In the course of developing his arguments against gay marriage, Michael Warner recognizes that the children grow up to a sense that think of themselves and all their members as heterosexual,” he writes, “and for some children this produces a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame. No amount of adult ‘acceptance’ or progress in civil rights is likely to eliminate this experience of queerness among children and adolescents.” Although for Warner such pain leads not to the redemptions of homosexuality in marriage, but to an alienation from all potential victims of sexual shaming, I still hear distinct echoes of Sullivan lamenting “those early wounds.” And the shamed queer child is still a boy. Warner’s world is divided into “women and gay people,” as he explains (in a gesture apparently intended as inclusive) that “Women and gay people have been especially vulnerable to the shaming effects of isolation.”

Because so many of the gay marriage advocates emphasize that the function of marriage will be to control gay male sexuality, Warner is able to argue plausibly that sex—or willingness to be identified with/by sex—is the faultline of contemporary lesbian/gay/queer politics. But sex is only one of the factors at issue. Sexual practices, even sexual identifications, don’t make a politics. That is surely the lesson of gay conservatism. Indeed, Warner argues, the very narrowness of the political field that he complains of. The new gay and lesbian constituency is being constructed through debates is a wholly, conventionally gendered as well as sexually circumscript crowd—each feminine woman already joined to another equally feminine woman, each male man eager to plith his troth to an equally manly fellow. It is dominated by adult males separated as children from the loving families they crave, by implication the welcoming world—around them only by their different sexual desires. There are very few women. No. 1 is poor. Or unhealthy. Or unwanted. Or bad intelligence. Women are not a market for reasons other than their sex. And people of color appear only as host communities—as in Warner’s proclamation of the “queer ethos is currently thriving in urban scenes...in drag cultures, among people of color.”

The future for gay men and women is one in which our gender, our sex, is neither abolished nor caricatured, but redefined. It is one in which being a man will always be everywhere different from being a woman but will be compatible in every respect with loving another man, just as being a woman will always and everywhere be different from being a man but will be compatible in every respect with loving another woman. (Love Undeatable, p.153)

"I'm gay? I do? But what this pattern actually sounds like is "I do? therefore "I'm gay"—that is, definitively, publicly gay.

But marriage is hardly the ideal institution through which to pursue public recognition, public space, space in the public realm. Marriage is a public declaration of a couple's withdrawal from the world. Except of course that it was not historically the couple that withdrew from the world but the wife, whose subsequent symbolic if not actual confinement to the privacy of her home testified to and materially supported the public stability and social integration—the civilization—of her husband. (Rather as the Jewish lesbian couples nesting just off-stage demonstrate the potential for civilization of otherwise errant gay men.)

Whose sexuality has historically been controlled by marriage? Can we forget how often, even in the United States, were the bitter struggles for a married woman's right to her own body, to her children, to own property, to make legal decisions, and to a divorce? These are still rights being battled over in much of the world.

As the gay marriage debate demonstrat-es, even when wedding is merely under discussion, women end up second-class citizens, as subjects and as participants. Claudia Card in "Civil Equality," Barbara Smith in the essays collected in The Truth That Never Hurts, and most recently Michael Bronski, have all in the past decade argued, like Warner, against the mainstreaming of lesbian and gay politics. Bronski shares Warner's errant gay men.)

The current debate about same-sex marriage, like Nan Hunter, are coming from the world but the wife, whose whose sub-sequent symbolic if not actual confinement to the privacy of her home testified to and materially supported the public stability and social integration—the civilization—of her husband. (Rather as the Jewish lesbian couples nesting just off-stage demonstrate the potential for civilization of otherwise errant gay men.)

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