

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5468>



Women

Capitalism and the family

- Features - Feminism -

Publication date: Sunday 22 April 2018

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Issues of gender and sexuality are dominating the American public in a way that has few precedents in the recent past. From the alarmingly open misogyny of the president to the cascading revelations of sexual attacks in the workplace on one side, to the energy behind the historic women's marches on the other, gender relations have risen to the top of the political debate. In a wide-ranging conversation, historian Stephanie Coontz places the current juncture in historical perspective, and offers her thoughts on how gender relations have been affected by the recent stagnation in working-class incomes and skyrocketing inequality. She closes with an eloquent plea to integrate gender politics into a broader progressive political vision.

C: Your intellectual project has been a remarkably consistent examination of the family and gender relations in the modern era. [1] How did you come to that focus?

SC: I was always interested in social history. When I was in high school, I won the Daughters of the American Revolution Award for history, which they may have regretted because my father was a Marxist economist. Because of him, I read things like *Man's Worldly Goods* and Bertolt Brecht's poem, "A Worker Looks at History" when I was in high school. As I went through college I realized that my dad's Marxism didn't really explain some of what I was running into in the sixties, issues of race and gender, and also things like outbreaks of irrational rage and violence, like the witchcraft persecutions of the sixteenth century, which were neither aimed at women by men, as many feminists claimed, nor represented attempts by the upper class to control the lower.

Still, one of Marx's most fundamental insights was this idea that has been since expanded by some theorists into the notion of social location. It explains how the way you relate to other people and to society's institutions "and they to you" in the process of making a living and seeking to sustain yourself and your family, and also the rules and values you develop and encounter because of your gender or race as well as your class, are critical in understanding how people organize and conceptualize their lives. I remember being very struck when I first began to look at how class position affected people's outlooks. I developed an analogy about the way we look at a crosswalk when we're driving a car versus when we're walking and wanting to cross the street. And what if all your life, you've only driven cars or only walked down the street. But of course nobody runs their life on the basis of "oh this is in my immediate interest and I don't care what anyone else needs." Or at least very few of us do. As social beings, we want to believe that what we do has meaning and is not just purely selfish. And to push the analogy, some people who drive a lot might be in relationships with people who walk a lot, so sometimes they can see beyond their own reactions.

So I've always been intrigued by the relationship between people's social location and class interests and the way that we filter the needs produced by those through our desire to believe that we are meaningful and good human beings. And eventually that led me to be interested in how people come to struggle for social justice, as well as how people reconcile acceptance or promotion of injustice with what I believe is a fundamental social impulse toward reciprocity. For example, I came to believe that the witchcraft accusations, which tended to flow, not from the rich to the poor, or vice versa, but from people slight better off toward people slightly below them, were often triggered by guilt or fear about withdrawing from traditional neighborly relations of reciprocity.

Before I started studying women's history in depth, I was trying to understand the development of racism from that perspective. For example, I was struck by the way that capitalism fostered a progressive ideology of equality, and yet actually helped produce a much more coherent and far-reaching ideology of racism than had existed in hierarchical precapitalist societies. I began to see racism as a way that people reconciled their material interests in slavery, or their acquiescence to its continuation, with their belief in equal opportunity. And I noticed a similar dynamic in the

development of biological theories about women's inability to participate in the freedoms supposedly being granted to men.

By the time I was hired to teach at Evergreen, I was very interested in women's history. An editor at The Feminist Press suggested I submit a book proposal on the history of women and I started to write it. But at that time, in the late seventies, it seemed like the book might evolve into just either what's been done to women through the years or what women have done in spite of it. So I began to look for a place where I could study women and men in the kind of complicated, ambivalent interactions that had started to fascinate me. And after a while it was like, "Oh, duh, the family!" That's what started me on that road.

C : But of course the family at that time was also at the center of a lot of feminist debates, as it was typically the domain in which you see male dominance really expressed and organized. How did that milieu influence you at the time?

SC: Well, I was certainly a supporter of feminism, but I was always bothered by concepts like "the patriarchy," which struck me as extremely ahistorical, and also from studying witchcraft, where accusations flowed between women (neither the very poorest nor the very richest of different families). I was fascinated by how complex people's assessments of their interests, entitlements, and rights can get. I wanted to get past seeing the family as just a locus of oppression without reducing it to only an interpersonal relationship.

C: Did you then come to view the family differently as your scholarship progressed, or did the scholarship more or less confirm what you had come in with?

SC: My research increasingly changed my point of view. Working with an anthropologist colleague, I began to see that the very mechanisms that initially reproduced cooperation and reciprocity in early foraging and horticultural societies also undermined both social and gender equality. Obviously, the family has long been a source of coercion and domination of women. But it's also been a way of dominating men. First because parental control over women's mating choices was also a way of controlling young men, and much later in history, because men's responsibility for women has kept their shoulder to the grindstone, so to speak. The family regulates and polices its members but also protects them in some ways. It's a site of struggle and accommodation as well as a site of control. Families have been shaped by and for the existing hierarchies of societies but sometimes they have changed in ways that weaken or challenge those hierarchies. As I began to see how much family life has changed over time, and how complex its dynamics have been, it made me question whether something like marriage was an inherently oppressive institution. I no longer believe that it is, even though we still carry a lot of baggage from the days when it did serve as a major way of enforcing gender, racial, and class power relations.

I also think we need to distinguish between personal and structural male dominance. When a man works extra hours every week to support a stay-at-home wife, it's hard to say he is oppressing her, even though this social practice reinforces women's secondary place in society and even his own wife's sense of dependence on his good will.

C: Let's focus for a second on the working-class family. There has been a view that Jane Humphreys, for example, articulated in the seventies: that the working-class family wasn't just a site of oppression, but also a place in which working people tried to defend their interests against employers and make their way in a brutal market economy. Is this the view that you think you increasingly came to?

SC: Yes, the family has been a place that fosters male entitlement over women and children but also provides some protection for them. It allows employers to pay workers less than is actually required for their reproduction but it's also been a place of where workers have resisted exploitation. It's a site of internal struggles between men and women

and children and also a site of altruism and love. If you go back to the notion that Marx raised about how social relationships involve relations of production and cooperation, the family is a perfect example of a place that involves power and coercion but also cooperation and mutual need. In turn, it can help us understand some of the contradictions and ambivalence we see among people whom we might think ought to be more directly “class conscious” about their opposition to employers or corporations.

C: Your work has not just pointed to the variability of family forms in history, but also in the recent past, within the capitalist era. Let’s focus on one particular form of the family that has figured prominently in your work, which is this male breadwinner family. You make the argument that not only is the nostalgia for this as the classic family form misplaced, but it fails to see that the life of this particular form was actually quite short, only a few decades. How long was this lifespan, what conditions enabled it to sustain, and which then eroded it?

SC: There were only a few decades that the male breadwinner family was a reality for the majority of families. It wasn’t until the early 1920s that a majority of kids grew up in a home where the mother was not either working alongside her husband on a farm or a small business or going out to work for wages, or the kids themselves weren’t going out to work for wages. In the early days of the industrial revolution, wives would tend to take outside employment when their children were young, the opposite of today, because their infants and toddlers could not contribute to the family economy. When the children were old enough to go to work, the wife would when possible withdraw from the labor force and use her time and expertise to stretch the money that the kids and the father brought home and increase the use value of the goods that could be bought with that money. She would do a lot of internal production, and she would also often bring in extra work by taking in sewing or borders. So, until the 1920s, most wives were still working beside their husband on farms or in small businesses or going out to work until the kids could work, then earning money or stretching it at home while the kids were at work. The male breadwinner family with mom at home with parenting her main job and the kids at school until their late teens, became just barely the majority parent-child arrangement in the 1920s, faded in the Depression and WWII, and roared back for a brief period in the exceptional postwar economic boom.

But the ideology of the male breadwinner family developed earlier than the reality, and did so as a very interesting departure from earlier gender and family ideals. In premodern societies, you had a male boss family, yes, but he was boss of the family labor force and women were considered absolutely vital to that. That’s why they were called yoke-mates and help-mates rather than “the little woman” or “the better half.” Their exclusion from legal and social rights was justified not on the basis that they were incapable but because every relationship had to have a superior and a subordinate, and they were subordinate to the male household head. My favorite example of this is a colonial sermon to wives that was very widely reprinted: “Yea though thou may have greater faculties of mind than thy husband and be in many respect of greater parts and brought more estate with thee at marriage. Yet since he is thy husband, the Lord has sent him above thee.” You might be smart, stronger, richer, but since every relationship has to have someone in charge, and that’s the husband, too bad.

But the flip side of this was that the woman who owned or inherited property, or was a widow or an unmarried woman of wealth and rank, was not excluded from the economic, or even the political, realm. Such women were in a sense treated as social “males.” Rank outweighed gender in some very important ways.

But as a market economy developed and household production and exchange were eclipsed by wage labor and cash exchanges outside the home, it was more difficult to combine the tasks of economic production and family reproduction. And in the absence of a consumer society where you could use your money to buy finished products, it made more sense for one person to stay and finish off those products. That could often improve the livelihood of the family more than sending everyone out for small wages. So you began to get this market economy pulling men and kids out of the home, leaving married women there. But at the same time, new ideologies about democracy and equality “the injustice of hierarchies imposed by noble blood” threw into question the old justifications for

female subordination. And the new ideals of the Enlightenment and the bourgeois democratic revolutions helped produce the new ideology that I've described in my book about the emergence of love match, the idea that young people should choose their mates for their own reasons and not have to follow their parents' wishes. All these things came together in a redefinition of gender that was extremely powerful, quite seductive, but also ultimately incompatible with the equality it supposedly furthered. We're still struggling with the remnants of that ideology of the female as nurturer today.

C: Which period are we talking about here?

SC: The seventeen and eighteenth centuries. The new ideology of democracy rejects the idea that some people must be subordinate to others because of a social hierarchy. And yet you do need women in the home and you've got this increasing division of spheres between husbands and wives. And you've also got a lot of anxiety about the love match — what will keep people from staying single if they don't find love, or getting divorced if love dies? How will we maintain gender order if love is more powerful than parental authority? And gradually a new ideology emerges that says no, it's not because women have to be subordinate to men that men are in charge of the outside world and women in charge of the home. It's because men and women have totally different capabilities and needs. Men and women are total opposites, each incomplete without the other. In premodern Europe and colonial America, women were expected to be tough enough to wring a chicken's neck and drive a hard bargain at the marketplace. It was not unmanly to weep, and men were in charge of arranging many social events, keeping track of kin, and arranging weddings. Women were actually considered the lusty sex, more prone to sexual error, and there was very little sentimentality about their maternal role.

But now all these shared traits increasingly got divided up. Men were to be tough, shrewd economic actors. Women were too weak to handle such a competitive environment, but they were the keepers of sexual and moral virtue, the nurturers, the social arrangers. In this view, men and women can get access to the resources, emotions, skills, and capabilities of the other sex only through marriage. And men aren't in charge because society decrees they're the boss. They're in charge because women are too delicate to do the kinds of things men have to do. Men need to protect women and they want to protect women because women represent these higher — almost precapitalist, if you will — communitarian kinds of values that men no longer have access to. So women are dependent, they have to be taken care of, but they also occupy the moral, caring high ground.

For many women who were accorded the honor of True Womanhood — and this did not include African-American women or others who worked alongside men — this seemed in many ways a step forward. A wife was now told no, it's not that you have to be subordinate to your husband, but that you have higher things on your mind than he is allowed to have. Well, that offered a sense of self-esteem that was not available in the older gender hierarchy and many women bought into it. And for many working-class women and men it became an aspirational notion — and also a powerful argument to win support for certain wage demands. They could argue that if indeed men needed to be the providers and women were too weak to do this and needed their protection, then men ought to be able to earn wages that allowed them to become male providers. So, for all these reasons, both the psychological and self-esteem reasons, and the class interests, this concept of a male breadwinner family took root long before it was capable of actually being put into practice. And these ideas hold tremendous attraction to some people even today.

C: Let's dwell a little bit longer on these decades in which the male breadwinner families consolidated. What you seem to be saying is that for women, it wasn't a simple issue of subordination to men. On the one hand, you can see it as kind of an escape from wage labor because in the nineteenth century, working conditions were pretty brutal, especially when you add on the extra responsibilities that women had to take on with childbirth. But on the other hand, once they exit the labor force, they are also becoming very dependent on men.

SC: You can see this trade-off as early as the nineteenth century. Nancy Cott studied the diaries of middle-class women experiencing this transition to the idea of the nurturing female homemaker. [2] She found that their diaries (and I've seen this in the public writings of nineteenth-century women as well) reflect a new sense of themselves as morally superior to men, who are caught up in the impersonal world of materialism and cash exchange. But there is simultaneously a new self-doubt about the worth of the work they do at home — an anxiety to, so to speak, prove themselves worthy of their keep, since they're not providing for the family. Women lose their sense of themselves as productive co-providers for the family. They have to make up for it in the realm of love.

C: In your work you make this point that before the emergence of modern feminism in the 1960s there was also kind of a mini-feminist explosion in the 1920s. What enabled this feminist turn, and why was it so ephemeral?

SC: Well, there was an even earlier period when you had an outbreak of what we would today consider a feminist thought. And that was during and right after the American Revolution and the French Revolution, when some people thought that the idea of equality ought to be taken really seriously and extended to issues of gender and class. New Jersey actually admitted women to the vote. There was a lot of feminist literature. I remember a widely circulated one off the top of my head — “Then equal laws let freedom find and no one than oppress. More freedom give to womankind or to mankind give less.”

But it subsided as the revolutionary fervor died down, more conservative forces came to the fore, and the realities of life made it clear that in fact, the objective basis for a modern feminist movement wasn't there. Then in the early twentieth century, a couple of things changed. More women joined the workforce and the development of a consumer society drew even non-employed women into the public sphere. Women took part in the war effort, and the long-standing suffrage movement became more militant and visible. At the same time, the contradictions of the Victorian cult of opposites led even some mainstream thinkers to believe that men and women should be freer to socialize and get to know each other before marriage. And during the roaring '20s, you got a sexual revolution that was more radical in comparison to older values than even the one of the 1960s. To the horror of middle-class traditionalists, boys stopped coming to “call” and sit in the parlor or on the front porch and instead picked the girl up to go out on a date. Contemporaries worried that the car was a “house of prostitution on wheels.” But old-school feminists were disappointed by the emphasis on sexuality and personal liberation and worried, correctly, that this didn't really change the conditions that made wives subordinate to husbands and stood in the way of full emancipation. At any rate, all these different strands of feminism and female assertions of independence receded during the pressures of the Depression and WWII. And even before that, the appropriation of Freudianism to sanction female sexuality, but only within a very rigid formula, was working to create the ideology that Betty Friedan was later to describe as “the feminine mystique.”

C: What was it about the Depression that pulled women back into the household? One would've thought that as wages were plummeting, both parents would have been pushed out into the economy, maybe triggering women's exit from the household?

SC: Well, despite the efforts of many feminist and socialist activists, the early-twentieth-century redefinition of femininity did not really challenge the overall ideology of the separateness of men and women. It merely gave it a different, more sexualized twist. In both middle-class and working-class circles, masculinity was as much, or perhaps more than ever, bound up with breadwinning. So when the Great Depression came and men began to lose their jobs, and women did have to either go out to work or do even more household production, there was a sense of resentment — on the part of women as well as men, but particularly a sense of a loss of masculinity among men. And there was a tremendous hostility toward women workers on the grounds that they were taking jobs that men could have and should have filled.

C: So let's move to the 1950s. In *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, you make an argument that this decade was contradictory in how it affected the family. On the one hand, there is a backlash against the insertion of women into the labor force in the war years, and a reassertion of patriarchal ideology, and this pulls women back into the home. But on the other hand, there are also economic forces pulling them back into the workforce, and hence laying the foundation for the erosion of the male-headed household. And this is what leads, a few years down the road, to the rise of the women's movement. So how do we understand that decade?

SC: The fifties were just built to self-destruct. The very things that made them the epitome of the male breadwinner family and made it look like they were the golden age of family life also worked to undermine that family. If you look back at just before World War II, you've gone through the Depression at this point, and the women old enough to have had to work or who have had to postpone marriage are ready to settle down. And WWII comes, so young couples marry in a hurry. And in 1946, after the men come back, there's a big increase in the divorce rate because some of these marriages were just too hasty and didn't work. But for the ones who didn't divorce, even though most women who had gone to work didn't initially want to quit their jobs, they were faced with tremendous pressure from political leaders, employers, and most veterans themselves to give those jobs back to the men. Only a few unions, like the UAW, wanted to campaign for full employment so "Sister Sue" as well as GI Joe could work. And even women like my mom, who had worked in the shipyards and was outraged to be handed a pink slip as soon as the GIs started coming back, had their own desires to start a family after postponing it for the war and seeing older women who had actually had to forego it because of the Depression. So if they were already married, they started having kids and dropped out of the workforce, and if they weren't married, they started marrying earlier, because, after all, it seemed that the men were getting these good jobs and could afford to get them the kind of homes and comforts which everyone had done without for so long.

But this rush into early marriage and childbearing paved the way, both materially and psychologically, for the erosion of the 1950s marriage regime. If you've been told that marriage is going to be the greatest thrill of your life, and it's only the wedding day and the childbirth that turn out to be the greatest thrill, because after that it's just more of the same ... well, you get this increasing sense of desperation, or at least discontent. Long before Betty Friedan, magazines and psychologists were wondering why a generation of women that "never had it so good" turned out to be so restless and anxious. And the women I interviewed from this era almost all reported this tremendous guilt because they *were* living better than their parents but they still felt something was missing. Friedan did an amazing service to many housewives by giving them a name for their discontent and telling them that it wasn't because they were psychologically non-women or immature that they were feeling this way, it was because they were real human beings who had every right to want to do meaningful work and to have something outside the home. [3]

In this newly expanding economy, you also have greater numbers of young women being sent to college by their parents. Many parents thought they were sending the boys to college to get a good job and the girls to college to get a good husband, but that didn't always work out that way. A lot of the girls who were sent to college found that they would really like to have a job, and when they did marry and drop out of college, they missed the intellectual excitement they had experienced. So you had all this discontent rising from many sources, even before it was accelerated by the radicalization of young people around the Civil Rights Movement, the antiwar movement, and women's growing outrage when they weren't allowed to participate in those struggles as equals.

But here's another important source. The very same economic boom and expanding consumer society that made the male breadwinner family possible created a demand for labor that young single women were not able to fill — not with half of all women getting married before they turned twenty-one. If you were going to recruit new workers, you had to turn to married women, even if most of them were brought into part-time jobs, a kind of reserve army of labor. Employers who wanted and needed help had to make it easier for women to work. They needed to provide breaks and make work attractive to women. And on the supply side, the gradual improvements in birth control made it easier for women to postpone marriage, while the spread of household conveniences made it easier for married women to

return to work. The result was that women streamed into the workforce during the 1950s and 1960s. And even though many women felt guilty about liking their jobs, nevertheless, you got to a certain point where work, or the expectation to work, outside the home became a central part of women's identity.

C: Since the early years of the feminist movement, it's remarkable how deep the erosion of traditional gender norms has been, especially in the social-democratic countries. What is your assessment of the recent advances, both in Europe and in the United States?

SC: Well, we've had some recent reminders of how persistent sexism is, but when you think about just how large a glass we have to fill to bring women up to the same level as men, I think it's fair to say that the glass is considerably more than half full. It's absolutely clear that the ideology of gender equality has made astounding strides in principle but also in daily life, particularly in marriage. It's interesting that we used to think of marriage as the most oppressive institution, but actually, at least among the young, married men tend to be much more egalitarian in their behavior and values than their unmarried counterparts. Unlike the recent past, marriage no longer triggers a backsliding among gender-egalitarian couples in their behavior. Childbirth does, but that is in part because of the constraints of inadequate work-family supports, and, especially in America, the heavy rewards for overwork, which perpetuate old patterns by making it costly for men to cut back. [\[4\]](#) 4

In Europe, where parental leave policies and good childcare make it easier to combine work and childrearing, marriages are less stressed and parents reports higher levels of happiness compared to non-parents than in the US. And in countries with strong work-family policies, dual-earner couples now have lower divorce rates than male breadwinner families. [\[5\]](#)

At the Council on Contemporary Families, we've hosted several debates about whether the gender revolution has stalled. [\[6\]](#) Most recently, David Cotter and Joanna Pepin reported that high school seniors had shown an increase in some forms of traditionalism, and Nika Fate found the same thing for male 18-25 year olds in the General Social Survey (GSS) up to 2014. The 2016 GSS, by contrast, recorded new highs in support for gender equality. [\[7\]](#) On the other hand, Donald Trump's campaign certainly tapped into a thick layer of misogyny, and the #MeToo movement has exposed how much sexual and gender harassment still exists.

So, it's a mixed bag. Working-class occupations in the US remain heavily segregated by gender. On average, women still earn less than men at every educational level. Interestingly, the highest gender gaps are in the highest paid occupations, though it used to be that the highest paid women earned only as much as the average-paid men. Now they greatly outearn such men, creating complex interactions between "and responses to " class and gender dynamics.

In married life, we see signs of men's increasing acceptance of female achievement. Until the 1980s, if a woman had more education than her husband, that was a divorce risk. Today, it is not. Recent studies show that when women earn more than their husbands, that too has ceased to raise the risk of divorce. And in a study that delights the hearts of most heterosexual women who hear about it, a study of marriages formed since the early 1990s shows that couples who share childcare equally report higher marital and sexual satisfaction than couples with a more traditional division of labor. They, along with couples who share housework equally, are the only couples to report having more sex than their counterparts in the past. [\[8\]](#)

Still, only 30 percent of the couples in this study did share childcare and/or housework equally, so we have a ways to go. And I think that we may face an upper limit on how far we can go without paying considerably more attention not just to bringing women into the workforce and making it possible for them to combine work and family, but to bringing men into the family and making it possible for them to combine family and work.

Another unsettled question is how the interaction will play out between the increase we've seen in support for gender equality and the resentments, fears, and mistrust spawned by the growth in income inequality and insecurity. Will the need for dual-earner families continue to increase the respect for women's roles as co-providers? Or will the focus on the gender grievances of women in the upper echelons evoke a backlash among sections of the lower-income working class?

C: OK, so let's move to this issue of inequality. A great deal of recent research shows that, over the past thirty or so years, there has been a kind of a bifurcation of what's happening in the family and marriage amongst college-educated, wealthier women on the one hand, and working-class women on the other. Marriage rates are collapsing and divorce rates rising in the latter group, while marriage remains relatively high and divorce falling among richer women. So as regards the family, class experiences seem to be sharply diverging, more so than in the postwar decades.

SC: Yes, a huge class divide has opened up in marriage and divorce rates. In the 1960s, marriage rates differed very little by education and income, with high school grads most likely to marry and highly educated women least likely. Today high-earning and highly educated women are much more likely to marry and much less likely to divorce. There are lots of reasons, including high incarceration rates and changing cultural mores, but one critical reason is the increasing insecurity, unpredictability, and inequality of working-class men's long-term wage and work prospects. This makes them less desirable marriage partners from a financial standpoint and it also encourages compensatory behaviors on the part of men that are not really conducive to stable relationships in general. At the same time, even though women still earn less than men, they have much better job prospects than in the past.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a young man could start out in almost any job, with the expectation that his earnings would improve substantially over time. From 1947 until the late 1970s, every generation of young men earned, on average, three times as much, in constant dollars, as their fathers had at the same age. Even if the job was dangerous or demeaning, confidence in future progress imbued a guy with the sense that deferring gratification, making compromises, and sticking it out would eventually pay off. A young woman could marry almost any man and expect him to support a family far better than she ever could, and better than her father had been able to support her mother. Even if her husband's behavior was less than ideal, her lack of alternatives to marriage and lower expectations of equality made her more likely to "stick it out" as well.

Today, despite its benefits for pooling resources and gaining support networks, marriage is much riskier than in the past, especially for a woman, because she has to balance the risks and benefits of investing in the relationship against the new possibilities of investing in her own earning power. Yes, if he keeps his job and shares his wages and lives up to her heightened expectations of fairness, marriage is a good deal. But if her husband loses his job, or misuses the couple's resources, she might have to use her low wages to support them both, and she could well end up worse off than if she had stayed single and focused on her own earning power. Like middle-class Americans, low-income couples also now have higher standards about what marriage ought to entail. Which leaves less-educated and low-income individuals facing a cruel irony: just as more effort, skill, and engagement is demanded of them as partners and parents than in the past, more of them are losing the social-support systems and daily predictability of income and job prospects that foster the skill to negotiate, the resilience to cope with relationship demands when life is stressful, and the incentives to refrain from behaviors that offer short-term escape from stress but undermine long-term relationship success.

Here's a good example of the irony. A new study shows that the lowest income sections of the population are the only places where married people are consistently better off psychologically than never-married ones. [\[9\]](#) But the very things that make a solid marriage so beneficial in low-income communities are the things that make it such a rare commodity. If you live in communities where jobs are scarce, where there is widespread deprivation, where you can't trust the police or some of your neighbors, where you've got very low levels of social capital and private or public investment — gosh, having a supportive spouse is a fabulous thing there. But finding a supportive spouse is a lot

harder. And when you do, because you have to rely so much on your spouse — more often and more intensely than middle-income couples, who have wider networks and the resources to purchase alternative or additional types of support or relief from stress — you end up with two people who are each making huge and constant demands on the other for support. This tends to set people up for disappointment and instability.

At higher income levels, both partners need less financial and personal support from marriage. They have friendship networks, professional networks, and enough financial resources to take a yoga class or get some household help or whatever. So this takes a lot of pressure off the marriage.

Now, the one place where these middle-class and upper-class advantages are less decisive is later in the lifespan of the marriage. Although marriages in the prime of life are lasting longer for educated and middle-to-upper-income people, the divorce rate for couples in their fifties and sixties has risen immensely since 1990 and there's not as great a class or educational difference in who gets divorced at that age. So we may be seeing a situation where, among the middle class, you can keep a marriage together while you're in a partnership raising the kids. But if for some reason you are not able to sustain the adult intimacy and passion and growth that we now expect of marriage, and you're still looking forward to another twenty healthy years of life, staying together until death do us part begins to feel a lot harder than it used to.

C: Doesn't this raise the question of why so many working-class women chose to vote for Trump, someone who seems pretty hostile to the system of social insurance that they would need? Is it related to the very divergent realities faced by women in different classes?

SC: A lot of different elements go into Trump's appeal to working-class women and men — and remember he also won middle-class, college-educated white women too. Certainly racism is involved, but it's also true that racial stereotypes and biases tend to become more salient when people are feeling economically stressed. And what I am most interested in is that section of working-class men and women who, whatever their racial prejudices, are not entirely driven by them. A very significant section of the white working class voted for Obama twice. Every logging county in my state of Washington did so. But as I've written elsewhere, when they didn't get hope and change, they were ready to try rage and blame. [\[10\]](#)

Despite the fact that many of Trump's female voters disapproved of his behavior, they didn't see Clinton as offering to stand up for those sections of America that had been losing ground for forty years and felt not just neglected but disrespected. I remember running across a quote from a woman who voted for Trump saying "Yes, he's a bully, but he's the kind of bully you want to beat up on the bullies who beat up on you." And to the extent that liberals did not acknowledge how much beating up had been going on, they opened themselves up to people deciding that it was time to overturn the apple cart. And a bull in a china shop can do that very well.

The fact is, we face some very difficult problems around the world, many of them posing painful dilemmas. But to the extent that we are going to make any progress at all, we have to reach out as best we can to a whole range of people that have been demonized or denigrated by the proponents of modernization and globalization and also by many sincere liberals and leftists.

I mean, when I would listen to Clinton's remarks or her speeches about inclusion and diversity during the campaign, I would always think, "Can we add a truck driver to that? Can we add a meat-packer to that?" And then when you get this "basket of deplorables" notion that these people are irredeemable, that's kind of self-defeating. We need to be able to figure out what the legitimate anxieties are that underlie some of the misplaced fury we see in America and speak to those anxieties without pandering to them. But also without demanding that people immediately and publicly repudiate every wrong notion or prejudice they might have.

Too many professionals fail to grasp how a small-town, working-class or rural community functions. Our education and training has endowed us with professional networks and technological tools that allow us considerable geographic and occupational mobility. But the very same processes that have made professionals' lives easier and more flexible have marginalized individuals whose identity, security, and livelihood depend on their detailed knowledge of a particular place and set of skills, and their *placement* in a set of long-standing personal networks that are often hierarchical but involve relations of mutual dependence that are difficult to disentangle. [11]

My dad worked his way up from labor organizer to professor and moved my mom and kids with him through many educational institutions and jobs. But every summer I came home to my grandparents in the town of Tumwater, where my ancestors had been some of the earliest white pioneers. It was then a very small town where everybody knew each other. "That's Mac's granddaughter," people would say when I went into a store, and you had to stop and talk. As my Hawaiian friends say, "talk story." In places like this, a guy gets a job because his relative puts in a good word with the supervisor, and the little grocery-store owner gets a bank loan because the banker shops there. Or you're a farm mechanic who repairs your neighbor's equipment, or a shopkeeper who depends on personal connections for your customers. Many industrial working communities as well as rural towns and small towns are based upon the exact opposite of professional mobility, interchangeability, and efficiency. They rely on long-standing ties of familiarity and reciprocity. When you depend on a neighbor, you need to know their character, and you are not quick to trust a stranger. But when you do know that someone belongs, you'll help out in ways and to a degree that you just don't see in busy professional neighborhoods.

Yet among professional elites, I see such disrespect for those communities and the people who work there. After my husband retired from the airline industry, he started raising organic grass-fed beef on the piece of land we inherited from my grandfather. When it's time to "harvest" a cow, we have a mobile slaughterer come out, because the worst part for animals is the fear that comes from being transported. So three guys come out with a bunch of equipment that costs a lot of money to invest in and one of them puts a perfectly placed shot "€" which is hard to do sometimes when you have a jumpy animal "€" that downs the animal in a second. Then they take the skin off all in one piece so it can be used, and cut off the head and the hooves. They hoist the animal up and cut it in half. We like to get the organ meats, so they cut those out for us and then they take the rest of it to the butcher to finish. And you know what they charge for a cow? This is a 1,300 pound cow they're dealing with, right? They charge \$75. That's the going rate for this kind of skill and knowledge and familiarity and willingness to drive all the way out to our place and then over to the butcher. And it just stuns me that we live in a world that will pay \$75 to these guys but drop \$500 for a consultant to put his feet on the desk and pontificate for half an hour. Respect for the dignity of this kind of labor has been completely lost in America and if you think people like that are going to accept the opinion of someone who doesn't respect them but can hardly change their own tires, well, you'd better think again. You have to respect the work that people do, the humanity they have, and then figure out where they are coming from and how you can relate to them before you have any hope of moving them. And even if you can't move them as far as you like, if you can move them a little, that's important. It's helpful. Even if it just means one more person who will recognize *your* humanity.

[Catalyst](#)

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] Stephanie Coontz and Peta Henderson (eds.), *Women's Work, Men's Property: The Origins of Gender and Class* (London: Verso, 1986); idem.

The Social Origins of Private Life (London: Verso, 1988); idem. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, Basic Books, 1992 and 2016); idem. *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); idem. *Marriage: a History* "from Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage" (New York: Viking, 2005); idem. *A Strange Stirring: the Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); idem. *American Families: A Multicultural Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998 and 2008).

[2] Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[3] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963).

[4] Council on Contemporary Families (CCF), Brief Report, "Overwork May Explain 10 Percent of Men's Wage Advantage Over Women." July 2014, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/ge...>, accessed February 18, 2018.

[5] CCF Brief Report, "Parenting and Happiness in 22 Countries," June 2016, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/br...>; CCF Brief Report, "Gender Revolution and the Re-stabilization of Family Life," August 2015, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/ge...>, accessed February 20, 2018.

[6] CCF Brief Report, "Back on Track? The Stall and Rebound in Support for Women's New Roles in Work and Politics, 1977-2012," July 2014, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/ge...>, accessed February 18, 2018.

[7] CCF Brief Report, "Back on Track? The Stall and Rebound in Support for Women's New Roles in Work and Politics, 1977-2012," July 2014, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/ge...>, accessed February 18, 2018. Joanna Pepin and David Cotter, "Trending Towards Traditionalism? Changes in Youths' Gender Ideology," CCF Online Symposia, March 2017, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/2-...>, accessed February 18, 2018. Barbara J. Risman, "A new generation wrestles with the gender structure," Oxford University Press blog, February 19, 2018, <https://blog.oup.com/2018/02/millen...>

[8] CCF Brief, "A Reversal in Predictors of Sexual Frequency and Satisfaction in Marriage," June 2016, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/se...>, accessed February 18, 2018.

[9] Daniel L. Carlson and Ben Lennox Kail, "Socioeconomic variation in the association of marriage with depressive symptoms," *Social Science Research* forthcoming.

[10] Coontz, "Taking the Nostalgia of Trump Supporters Seriously," Berggruen Institute, Insights, no. 4, <http://insights.berggruen.org/issue...>, accessed February 18, 2018.

[11] Stephanie Coontz, "The shell-shocked white working class," CNN Opinion, September 23, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/23/opini...>, accessed February 18, 2018.