Why We Abolished Marriage:

A Private "Eutopia"

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Approved in 2048, the abolition of marriage turned upside down not only the sexual organization of society but also the idea of lineage. This historical transformation was carried forth by a utopian group that no one, around 2010, had taken seriously. This article looks back at a movement that transformed our lives.

The Abolition of Marriage

In honor of the bicentennial of the second law abolishing slavery, the National Assembly voted on April 27, 2048 to approve a law abolishing marriage. Henceforth, it became illegal to live according to this institution's provisions. Neither the reestablishment of divorce by mutual consent in the second half of the twentieth century, nor indifference towards sexual orientation, made official in 2020, had been enough to unsettle marriage's foundations. The institution's mysterious force had proved resilient in the face of these changes, even as its effects continued to undercut spousal equality.

Around 2040, however, the dream that marriage could be spared such effects became increasingly seen as illusory: living as a couple was dangerous since, sooner or later, it always recreated a division of labor that jeopardized spousal equality and thus, in most cases, gender equality. John Stuart Mill's dream, in marrying Harriet Taylor, had proved impossible to achieve, save for a tiny minority. He wrote a marriage contract that was idealistic but paradoxical: "Being about, if I am so happy as to obtain her consent, to enter into the marriage relation with the only woman I have ever known, with whom I would have entered into that state; and the whole character of the marriage relation as constituted by law being such as both she and I entirely and conscientiously disapprove … I declare it to be my will and intention, and the condition of the engagement between us, that she retains in all respects whatever the same absolute freedom of action, and freedom of disposal of herself and of all that does or may at any time belong to her, as if no such marriage had taken place." After further discussions with Harriet Taylor, Mill, around the time of the 1867 Reform Act, proposed to amend this utopian marriage, which would have no effect on either spouse, by replaced the word "man" with "person." The objective of both examples was to abolish the male supremacy that matrimony and the ambiguous word "man" perpetuated. In both instances, Mill's target was to abolish sex as the primary category structuring our social life. He might also have recommended that one's sex no longer be mentioned on one's identity

papers: according to what principle must "male" or "female" be considered more significant than other personal traits?

Let us return to the abolition of marriage in the 2040s. After counting and recounting and always ending up with the same result, after observing, over and over, the same effects on professional commitments, it at last became clear that to live as a couple was inherently dangerous. You did not have to wait until textbooks were changed in 2028, as were Christmas game catalogues in 2034, to notice that even once little girls were no longer given toy cleaning utensils, they still cleaned house more than men when they grew up. The compromise that Mill proposed in the nineteenth century — a marriage "as if no marriage had taken place" — simply could not hold in the twenty-first century. Nor did the rise of cohabitation in the 1980s change anything: household injustice persisted with few modifications. One of the partners gradually took charge of conjugal and family business. The only remaining option was to preclude this fate by abolishing marriage and the family altogether. As the late-twentieth-century writer Carole Pateman observed, contractual logic — applied to marriage or living together — in no way spelled the end of masculine supremacy. Social nature abhors a void, meaning that it became necessary to fashion other forms of private life after marriage's abolition. This is what happened in the decades following 2048.

Cleaning House Alone

Everything was organized around one basic principle: respect for the individual. Once again, no one had any qualms about turning to classic texts, notably *A Room of One's Own,* published in 1929, a few years after the First World War. Virginia Woolf demanded for each woman "five hundred pounds a year and a room with a lock on the door." Strictly speaking, she proposed a *eutopia:* a private space available to each man and woman, not only to sleep, but primarily to devote to one's personal life. The key calls attention to the need to withdraw, to shield oneself, in order to write or to pursue other activities without being subject to the demands of others. In the project of the twenty-first century, this "room of one's own" became an apartment in which one could live alone, while also having room to receive guests. Unlike our ancestors, we privilege the household over the couple, thus making other kinds of gender relationships possible. Beyond the issue of equality, the status of the heterosexual couple, which remained dominant through the 2040s, imposed on both men and woman a construction of gender that was always relative to another gender. Indeed, the heterosexual couple created a near obligation to think of oneself in terms of gender "complementarity": the masculine or feminine dimension of one's identity prevailed over all others. In the great period of emancipation that followed 2048, it seemed necessary to avoid the dangers of the heterosexual couple, which, all things considered, resembled the problem of mixed classes at school. The coexistence of boys and girls in the same class rendered many traits secondary that would have been more important if the group were unisex.

The goal was thus to open up new possibilities for personal identity by making it less dependent on the gender relationship. Equality was only one of emancipation's implications. Freedom was just as essential, notably the freedom of self-definition. The couple, whether legitimate or not, tended to impose identities on the spouses, of which sex was the most salient aspect. When the heroine of *The Bridges of Madison County* feels recognized by an individual other than her husband, she declared that she at last felt like a "woman" — as if this term encompassed the totality of her being. These were the kinds of equivalencies that were

targeted by marriage abolitionists. While impacting both sexes, the predominance of gender in the social definition of selfhood principally affected women. Witness the success of so-called "women's magazines" (*Elle, Madame Figaro*, and *Marie Claire* were among the most famous examples of the last third of the twentieth century), as well as this very category itself: it was as if "the feminine" could be—indeed, had to be—the primary reference point in constructing one's individual world. In *Gender Advertisements*, Erving Goffman, one of the twentieth century's great sociologists, quipped that bathroom duality permanently revalidated the bipartition of individuals according to sex. The continued presence of such markers in public spaces had effects comparable to those of marriage and the couple.

The abolition of gender inequalities depended not only on measures advocating equality; it also required, necessarily—and herein lies this utopia's true meaning—attitudes that broke the headlock in which "sex" held social reality. For as long as "gender" remained central to social identity, individuals felt the need to affirm first and foremost this aspect of themselves in order to exist. Yet sexual traits, notably "feminine" ones, generally became incarnate in couples and families, as a result of the historical separation of the public from the private sphere. The domain of the couple proved confining for women, who had to prove their femininity in this context more than any other. In the second half of the twentieth century, mentioning gender in job advertisements was forbidden. But no one envisaged extending this prohibition to the marriage market, which called attention to the fact that it was indeed in the private sphere that gender was most at play and socially sanctioned. The opening of marriage (before its abolition!) in 2020 to all individuals, whatever their sexual orientation, proved, in addition to the fact that heterosexuals and homosexuals could be treated equally, that gender was not a prerequisite for its existence. This was a first sign of the weakening grip of sexual categories—one that remained insufficient, however, because it did not seriously challenge the historical meaning of the "couple." This is why the one adult household has become the normal form of private life, one that, in the early twenty-second century, is no longer challenged.

A Life Together

Alone, but together. The second constitutive element of this "eutopia" was a home in which personal and collective spaces were combined. Its conceivers were inspired by a late twentieth century innovation for elderly women (and which, with the sharp increase in life spans, continued to develop): refusing both solitude and retirement homes, these women found a way to reconcile "my home" with "our home." The idea was not to return to a "collectivist" lifestyle: in the post-1968 years, the absurdities of abandoning the "so-called bourgeois couple" for the community (which, architecturally speaking, meant opening up all private spaces) became obvious. There was no point in replacing the couple with the community, as the latter could quickly operate according to a similar division of labor. The ideal lay in a balanced alternation between being alone (strictly speaking) and being with others, in various ways. This required that individual adult "households" be grouped together in collective dwellings, ideally self-managed ones, like the Babayagas building in Montreuil-sous-Bois.

It is for this reason that this "eutopia" should not be called a "community," since individualization remains the benchmark value. A German woman living in this kind of self-managed collective residence emphasized that respect for others was necessary, but in no way

self-evident: "What makes it difficult is that we all had very different journeys … and we all think that, at our age, we've found the right path. But here, that means eleven different paths." Stated in a slightly plaintive tone, this remark in fact proved constructive, as the collective, by its very design, tends to try to efface difference and to impose power relations encouraging uniformity. This individualization of dwellings in the context of a collective residence can be compared to the invention by certain couples, between 2000 and 2010, of a non-cohabiting lifestyle organized around two homes, preferably close to one another. This made it possible to avoid what Helga Grüger and René Levy at the time referred to as the "master status": the existence for each gender of a primary sphere—family for the woman, work for the man—which becomes the main reason for women's inequality in both spheres. The interest in separating the sexes in the private sphere in this way was, according to Gilda Charrier and Marie-Laure Déroff, to make negotiation obligatory, shattering self-evident assumptions ("this is how it's done"), particularly those tied to the division of sexual labor.

Since 2050, we have become accustomed to the idea that adults have their own household and individual dwellings. On this basis, they can create, as they see fit, different communities of varying form and content. No common appropriation of bodies, no pooling of resources is required, as was so often the case in nineteenth and twentieth-century conceptions of community life. We all have our own homes, but in the context of a form of "togetherness" whose boundaries are defined by mutual consent. This is the meaning of our "reflexive postmodernity."

A New System of Lineage

Everything about the invention of this space that is at once closed (and locked with a key) and open (thanks to the nearby presence of neighbors, maybe even sympathetic ones) would (perhaps) be wonderful if it did not overlook the question of children. When Engels dreamt, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State,* of the advent of the "true" couple after the abolition of private property, and when Anthony Giddens later described "pure relationship" as the private sphere's ultimate horizon, they spoke little or not at all of children. It is undoubtedly for this reason that the first self-managed homes, like those of the babayagas, were for elderly women (and later for students): environments, in other words, where there were no children around to trouble adult relationships. Indeed, what was one to do with the children? Could one follow Plato in his idea of a children's orphanage? This idea settled three problems: social inequalities resulting from the reproduction process, inequalities related to caring for and raising children, and the struggle for independence that is necessary to becoming oneself. But in the 1940s and 1950s, René Spitz's work on "hospitalism" demonstrated the benefits of personalized relationships with children, at the very least in early infancy. Excessive collectivism can harm personal development, both for the child and the adult.

This is why, after 2040, in order to complete the abolition of marriage, a new system of lineage was proposed. In addition to the method that was once considered traditional—the sexual union of a man and a woman—and which has not been the norm for years, there are many other ways for making children. The model that has prevailed is not that of a generalized orphanage, but rather of a kind of generalized "adoption." An individual (of any sex) can choose to have a child by having recourse to any particular technique, providing she or he signs a contract of parental responsibility. This parent may give the child one or several godparents. Since the 2060s and 2070s, debates from earlier periods about the number of parents a child needs and whether sexual difference is essential to parenthood have been read

with some disdain. The extent to which the sexual order of society was troubled by these questions has been observed. Now, each child has one "primary" adult, one parent. The child lives with his or her parent in the parent's own home and room. And thanks to collective living, he or she meets other adults.

The justification of parents of different sexes rested, in the second millennium, on a conception of the primacy of identity's sexual character. If a boy needed, in order to construct his identity as a boy, both a mother and a father, it was because, as an adult, he had to define himself primarily as a man (and vice versa for girls). The power of the utopia we have inherited lies in the idea that gender should simply be one aspect among others of our identity—and not necessarily the most central.

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Despite its limitations, what this "eutopia" has allowed us to do is reflect on what lies beyond and what lies below the question of gender equality. It was impossible to achieve the latter as long as this way of categorizing human beings was not called into question, as long as sex was the primary reference point according to which individuals were defined. The future of private life does indeed rest upon John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor's insight: until the term "person" and "individual" replaces the words "man" and "woman," not only in legal texts but also in the way we clean house, there is little that can alter the gender regime. The play of sexual and gendered identity, as imagined by late-twentieth-century queer theory, remained for too long confined to an exclusively sexual terrain—as if the problem could be resolved simply by lifting the social imposition of gender roles. The utopia, the major stages of which we have traced, was for more ambitious: at long last, it brought gender as the dominant form of classification and identity to an end.

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