

The Century Social Science Series

PROBLEMS OF THE FAMILY

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**PROBLEMS OF THE
FAMILY**

THE CENTURY SOCIAL SCIENCE SERIES

EDITED BY
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January, 1928

INTRODUCTION

Within the last twenty-five years there has sprung up a vital and growing interest in the institution of the family and its functioning in modern civilization. This widespread concern about the workings of marriage and the family is noteworthy in that it indicates a more or less complete abandonment of the age-old taboo upon any critical investigation in the field of sex relations, or even of any open discussion of these questions. A generation ago the frank consideration of such problems as freedom for the woman in marriage, education of young people in sex matters, birth control, divorce, and a score of other moot questions would have condemned the men and women who attempted it to social disapproval. Yet, even then, the wisdom of maintaining the ancient ban was being questioned by a few daring spirits in Europe. As early as 1892, Mrs. Havelock Ellis was delivering addresses in England which openly attacked specific evils in the marriage relation and even advocated a "novitiate for marriage"—a proposal that must have chilled the souls of all but her most "advanced" hearers. Yet, when in 1906 the American Elsie Clews Parsons threw out the suggestion that a period of "trial marriage" might prevent much unhappiness among young people, pulpits in her native land thundered their disapproval of her and her book.¹

Obviously the relaxation of the taboo upon critical examination of our sex *mores* would not have occurred without grave cause. And this cause may be found in the fact that the ancient institution of marriage and the family is not working smoothly under modern conditions of life. The friction in the machinery has gradually become so loud and persistent that its harsh grating offends the ears of conservatives and radicals alike and can no longer be ignored. Just as maladjustment within the church or the government has led in the past to criticism and ultimately to revolution, so a similar disharmony between the family and contemporary economic, social and psychological facts is producing a volume of hostile criticism, while signs are not lacking of what has been termed a "marriage revolt."

Under these conditions it would seem that a serious and impartial

¹ The Family, p. 349.

study of the family institution in its historical evolution would be timely and helpful to young women and men who will probably spend the greater part of their lives within some family. Such a study should help us to understand and appreciate the enormous importance of the family in ancient and modern civilization. It should make plain the indispensable services rendered to society in the past, the important contributions of the family to present social life under transformed conditions, and the functions of the family in the society of the future. Furthermore, it should help the student to comprehend how certain marriage customs and ideas have sprung from circumstances rooted deep in ancient culture history and how, through sheer force of social inertia, they persist in contemporary life long after they have been outgrown. For instance, the restrictions still laid, in some countries, on the holding of property by married women, as well as the management of it, goes back to feudal times, when powerful overlords looked to their vassals to furnish quotas of armed men in case of war. Clearly a woman holding a fief could not be relied upon to secure and equip these forces—hence the feudal law that women could not inherit land unless there were no male heir. This situation it was, together with the widespread legal theory that a woman's separate personality was merged in that of the husband after marriage, that is chiefly responsible for the laws on the statute books of certain modern nations limiting the power of married women to hold and manage property, to make contracts, to sue and to conduct their own cases before the law. Again, the general custom among civilized nations whereby the father has superior rights in the guardianship of children goes far back in culture history to the beginnings of the patriarchal family among Aryan people. However this family type might differ in details among Greeks, Romans, Slavs and mediæval barbarians, its essential character remained the same. It was an organization in which the oldest male head was the undisputed ruler of wife, children and (in Rome) slaves. Domestic religion, control of property, the education and marriage of children, even the control of the conduct of his wife—all were in the hands of the patriarch who was thus the sole arbiter of the destinies of every member of his household. Small wonder that such vast powers, sanctioned by ages of custom, should yield tardily and grudgingly to modern conditions.

To be enlightened concerning the sources of our present-day ideas and practices with respect to marriage, the family and irregular sex relations outside the sanctioned marriage institution is to be equipped for dealing with outworn customs and ancient abuses. No scientist would attempt to solve a practical problem in chemistry or biology until he had

thoroughly mastered the causes of the phenomenon and the conditions favorable to its maintenance. Likewise no one desirous of bringing about improvements in the sex *mores* can hope to work intelligently and helpfully without understanding the historic causes of modern sex and family customs. An open-minded study of the genesis and evolution of the family, together with its indispensable contributions to civilization, should induce not only an enlightened desire to work for much-needed changes, but also an appreciation of the complexity and delicate ramifications of the problem and of the peculiar difficulty of achieving reforms in folkways hallowed by daily use and wont. To attain a clear perspective with regard to those human relationships closely bound up with our deepest and most intimate feelings is a difficult accomplishment and demands ability to detach ourselves from an obscuring cloud of instinct and emotion (in the interest of clarity and truth). Once the ideal of a freer and more spiritual marriage and family life has been perceived, there is no less need for a clear recognition of realities and a patient, tactful persistence in educating the popular mind which seem the only sure methods of social change in this difficult field of social relationships. The sex *mores* of a people cannot be transformed in a day or a generation; and, even though changes in ideal and practice seem to be following rapidly upon each other, it is probable that the minds of the vast body of unthinking or conservative people remain unchanged on these questions. Witness the action of the Episcopal Church of America in its recent convention (1922) refusing to sanction divorce save for the one cause of infidelity and prohibiting clergymen from marrying any divorced person except the innocent party to a divorce on Scriptural grounds. While experiments in a more ideally satisfying sex and family life will doubtless be made from time to time by daring souls, the large majority of men and women must be won by the slow and undramatic method of education to acceptance of the freedom of men and women in marriage, of the degrading character of sex relations without love and spiritual union, of the urgent need for a sounder understanding of sex life on the part of young and old.

When the ban, laid centuries ago, upon critical examination of marriage and family customs began to be lifted, a long step was taken toward the dawn of a better social order. And when enlightened education of every youth and adult in the purposes and meaning of sex and family life has won the day, it is reasonable to hope that the present restless dissatisfaction with our sex folkways will give place to efforts (on the part of most individuals) to realize a finer sex relationship, a freer, more satisfying and at the same time more spiritually developing form of family

life than any the race has known. A historical study of the family reveals the slow, upward climb of mankind from brute sex lust to romantic love, from the more or less complete subordination of women and children within the family to relative personal freedom. The strong family unit of past generations has already split up into its component individuals, recognized as separate persons before the law, with definite legal rights. But the end is not yet. The hardest lessons men and women have to learn are those of true love and of the necessity for freedom in personal development to the end that, one by one, all those fetters upon individual growth within the family inherited from the autocratic civilization of the past shall be struck off.

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PART ONE
HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

PRIMITIVE FORMS OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

DIFFICULTIES ATTENDING THE STUDY OF THE PRIMITIVE FAMILY

THE student of social institutions who seeks to obtain clear ideas about marriage, family customs and the position of women and children among primitive peoples soon discovers that he is confronted with a mass of material dealing with a bewildering number of tribes inhabiting widely separated portions of the earth. Not only is there the greatest variety of marriage and family customs among these peoples, but the student is further confused by the fact that anthropologists explain the data at hand by contradictory theories. The earlier social writers of the last century showed a disposition to formulate too hastily a theory of the original form of sex relationships and to interpret data revealing the sharpest differences in the light of their chosen formula of explanation. Only within the last decade or two have anthropologists resolutely resolved to throw overboard all ready-made theories concerning family origins and customs and to investigate the sex *mores* of each tribe in the open-minded spirit and by the painstaking methods of science. The result has been to reduce the number of conflicting views with regard to the original forms of marriage and family organization and to increase our store of accurate knowledge of the manifold sex customs of primitive peoples. So wide a variety of types of family life makes generalization difficult and the careful writer will therefore draw general conclusions cautiously and even tentatively. Nevertheless, certain customs do emerge from the mass of conflicting facts which appear to be common to a large majority of tribes. For example, the wide prevalence of clearly defined kinship systems, of marriage prohibitions, of wife purchase and of rules of residence makes possible some general conclusions regarding the primitive family, even while these may admit of numerous exceptions.

MARRIAGE: ITS MEANING AND ORIGIN

Having cleared the ground of a few outstanding difficulties, we may next consider the question, What is the meaning of marriage and how did it originate? The word "marriage" signifies to most people a union of

one man and one woman based upon mutual affection and continuing to the end of life. Such, however, is not the meaning attached to the term by students of primitive life. To them, marriage means a more or less temporary union of male and female persisting beyond the act of procreation and the birth of children to the time when the offspring can care for their primary wants themselves. From this point of view, marriage is purely a biologic function, a means whereby the species is maintained. But if this be the fundamental significance of marriage, it is clear that such unions are not confined to the human race but flourish among the higher mammals, especially the apes, and even among birds. It is a fact well known to naturalists that the male gorilla, the chimpanzee and the orang-utan remain with the female and their common offspring until they are able to shift for themselves. The male not only protects his mate and their young, but he procures food for them during their period of helplessness. Here, then, is an example of the essential meaning of marriage as understood by anthropologists.

But what is the original cause of such unions, characterized as they are by some degree of permanency? Mutual affection between male and female can hardly explain the facts, since mates frequently separate for trivial causes, among both the apes and primitive man, after the young can care for themselves. Sexual desire cannot of itself account for marriage, since this impulse comes and goes fitfully and can be easily satisfied without the formation of permanent ties. The true explanation of the origin of marriage is held by most anthropologists to lie in the complete helplessness of the offspring of both apes and man, which requires the services of both parents over a long period of time. Those parents who did not develop the nurturing instinct lost their offspring through death and did not perpetuate themselves. Thus Nature "selected" for survival those species in which parental care of the young was most fully developed. If, then, the helplessness of infancy be the primary cause of a union of male and female permanent enough to be called marriage, we are led to the interesting conclusion that *the family is the true origin of marriage*, not marriage of the family. When we reflect that marriages are frequently contracted today with the definite purpose of postponing for years the rearing of a family, or of having no children at all, this well established theory of the genesis of marriage assumes peculiar significance. In an age when marriage is coming to be looked upon as the union of a man and a woman for personal motives, *i.e.*, satisfaction of love and the desire for congenial and stimulating comradeship, the biologic cause of such union is quite frequently ignored.

UNIVERSALITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL FAMILY

Although the original forms of the family were various, one characteristic seems to hold good of family organization among them all—even of the “group marriage” of Australian and Melanesian tribes, *viz.*, *the family was individual*. By this is meant, of course, that the family consisted of a separate and well defined household group composed of husband (or husbands), wife (or wives) and children, and, in some instances, of the maternal or paternal grandparents with their children. The researches of anthropologists tend to support the theory that the individual family precedes in development the sib or clan and hence is the original unit of social organization. On the prevalence of the individual family Dr. Lowie writes: We “are justified in concluding that regardless of all other social arrangements the individual family is the omnipresent social unit. It does not matter whether marital relations are permanent or temporary; whether there is polygyny or polyandry or sexual license; whether conditions are complicated by the addition of members not included in *our* family circle: the one fact stands out beyond all others that everywhere the husband, wife and immature children constitute a unit apart from the remainder of the community.”¹

MARRIAGE PROHIBITIONS

Among all primitive peoples there exist certain restrictions upon marriage. The more general of these prohibitions may be briefly treated under the following heads: (1) incest, (2) endogamy and exogamy, (3) marriage within a limited group.

Incest.

The horror of incest, or sex relationship between near relatives, is universal among primitive tribes; but the interpretation of what constitutes incest differs widely in opinion and practice. Social writers have offered numerous explanations of this widely prevalent aversion. Hobhouse regards it as instinctive while Westermarck inclines to the belief that the horror of incest is not primarily an aversion to intercourse between near relatives but rather a dislike of cohabitation between household associates. Be the reason what it may, this deep-rooted feeling has led to the formulation of incest prohibitions among all peoples. Universally sex intercourse between parent and child is forbidden. On the other hand, marriages between brother and sister were common among the ruling

¹ *Primitive Society*, pp. 66-7. Boni and Liveright, New York, 1920. By permission.

classes of Hawaii, Peru and ancient Egypt. The explanation of this custom seems to be that the chieftains and kings of these peoples had developed such pride of race that only sisters of the blood were regarded as worthy to mate with them. At the opposite extreme is the custom of some tribes of prohibiting marriage between second and third cousins and even, as in the case of the Paviotso tribe of Nevada, of the most remote cousins, who are held to be blood kin.

Exogamy and Endogamy.

Further restrictions upon marriage are seen in the customs of exogamy and endogamy. The tribal requirement that marriage be outside the clan or tribe is called *exogamy*; the requirement that mating shall be wholly within the clan is called *endogamy*. And, be it noted, these customs have all the coercive force of law. Once established, they operate as powerful prohibitions against marriage within or without the clan as the case may be. Numerous theories have been advanced by social writers to account for these prohibitions. One of the earliest views was that such arrangements prevented the marriage of kinsfolk. Tylor,² however, holds that exogamy did not originate in the desire to prevent marriage among kindred, since marriages were prohibited only on the mother's or the father's side, thus making unions between kin on the other side admissible. Rather does Tylor believe that exogamous marriages had a political source. They were a means of binding various clans together in peaceful alliances. This view receives support from the studies of Morgan among the Iroquois tribes, where intermarriage clearly had political significance. McLennan and others have sought to account for exogamy by the widespread practice of female infanticide, which would force men to secure wives outside their own clan. The flaws in this theory lie in the facts that (1) female infanticide is by no means a universal primitive custom; and (2) the theory does not explain the prohibition of marriage within the clan. Even if men were compelled to seek mates outside the kinship or totem group, there would seem to be no reason why they should not marry such women in the clan as had been permitted to live.

Endogamy has also been accounted for on the theory that it is a product of racial pride, class divisions and religious taboos. Thus Lowie points out that endogamy is firmly established among the Hindus, whose caste system is ironclad. Wherever the tribe is split up into groups regarded as higher or lower in rank, there the prohibition of marriage outside an individual's own group tends to prevail. The ancient Jews prac-

² See article "The Matriarchal Family System," in *Nineteenth Century*, July, 1896.

ticed endogamy for religious reasons, in order that the monotheistic worship of Jehovah should not be stamped out by intermarriage with their idolatrous and polytheistic neighbors.

In his well-known study of *Human Marriage*, Westermarck holds that the prohibition of marriage within the group was the result of a powerful sentiment against sexual intercourse with persons reared in the same family or neighborhood. He points out that when individuals are reared together from early youth they develop a marked indifference or even aversion to sexual intercourse with family members of the opposite sex. While this is probably true in general, it is by no means universally the case. Studies of the causes of illegitimacy among girls have plainly revealed that in not a few instances the first steps toward loose and irregular sex relations were taken by young girls who had been violated by members of their own family.

FORMS OF MARRIAGE IN PRIMITIVE TRIBES

Apart from group marriage, which is very rare, the forms of marital union most frequently found among rude peoples are polygamy, polyandry and a modified monogamy. Polygamy, when precisely used, designates *both* the marriage of a man with more than one wife and the union of a woman with more than one husband. The exact term to indicate marriage with two or more wives is "polygyny," and this term will be consistently used in that sense in this study. Polyandry designates that form of polygamy where a woman mates with several husbands.

Polygyny.

Marriage with several women is very general among primitive tribes. Probably the determining cause of this type of union is not the desire for sexual variety, although this doubtless plays its part. Far more important, however, are certain economic and social causes. The man with more than one wife has a group of workers—wives and children—more or less under his control, who can be utilized to increase his store of goods. If he works them hard enough they may add materially to his wealth. Moreover a plurality of wives greatly enhances a man's prestige within the tribe. It is an outward and visible sign of power and prosperity. Therefore it is not surprising to learn that polygyny flourishes among peoples widely scattered over the face of the earth. It is found among the Iroquois tribes of North America, the Kai of New Guinea and many native tribes of Siberia and Africa. But it is one thing to state that polygyny is a widespread form of marriage and quite another to declare that among