

From Welfare Queens to Gay Marriage: the Path to Compulsory Heterosexual Marriage?

A major icon of the Reagan era was the welfare queen, developed carefully in the media by conservative leaders to evoke taxpayer disgust and resentment. This icon was female, Black, unmarried, drove a Cadillac, and had gangs of children whose very existence brought her great financial benefits from the government. A major icon of the 21st century is the gay couple, developed carefully in the media by gay leaders to evoke sympathy and compassion. This couple is male/male or female/female, white, wants a wedding, drives a Subaru, and seeks benefits from the government. Both stand historically at the center of a swirling, culture-changing controversy about morals, values, money and power.

The welfare queen arose from the 1980s, a decade dedicated to globalization, corporatization, the trickle-down theory of economics, union-busting, deregulation, anti-taxation, and privatization. It was a forceful, and ongoing, agenda to bring more wealth to the powerful and to destroy the social contract that was created following the Great Depression. The idea that we pay taxes because we live in community and must provide care for each other was replaced by the myth of scarcity and meanspiritedness: the idea that there is not enough to go around and someone is going to take “mine” from me. The social contract was broken when human needs were successfully portrayed as racialized problems that people of color had somehow wilfully created. The welfare queen was created by Reagan to represent the immorality, greed, and tax burden that are destroying our culture: a Black woman, under the authority of no man, who takes the money of good honest people who pay their taxes. The way to stop her and to save America was to eliminate those taxes and cut those benefits right out from under her.

The marriage-seeking gay couple arose from the culture wars of the past three decades in which sexuality outside of marriage was bad, family was narrowly defined as married couples with children, and allegiance to country was blended with belief in heterosexual, monogamous two-parent families. Good gay people increasingly became identified as those who passed and who sought ways to mainstream into a culture whose norm was white and middle-class. By the 1990s, not many LGBT organizations were taking on the broken social contract that was fracturing our society; instead, they were for the most part seeking equality in a vastly unequal world. It was then that the path of the welfare queen and the good gay couple began to merge. And the Right figured out how to combine racism and homophobia in its strategies to move both its economic and social agenda.

Their common road was displayed in 1992 in the two landmark ballot measures in Oregon and Colorado. These constitutional amendments called for prohibiting “minority status” and “quotas” for lesbians and gay men—that is, prohibiting something that no one in the LGBT community had ever called for. In their campaigns, they argued that “gay rights are special rights” and that only “deserving minorities” should receive civil rights, i.e., special rights. What they successfully accomplished in these campaigns was to redefine this country’s understanding of civil rights to be special rights (as opposed to civil rights being constitutionally granted to all) and to make people think that one had to be deserving in order to receive them. And who became defined as not deserving? Why, of course, LGBT people, depicted by both the mass media and our own as white, and the Black welfare queen. These amendments, defeated in Oregon and

passed in Colorado, prepared the groundwork for the Right to attack affirmative action as a special right and to take Black communities the message that white gay men and lesbians are challenging both their morality and their civil rights gains.

These cultural, religious, and economic wars continue. The welfare reform act has virtually demolished welfare; no elected official dares to support increased taxation despite an enormous national debt, impoverished state governments, and diminishing human services; churches have become a major force in politics; and gay rights, abortion, and immigration remain the hot button issues of the media and elections. These conditions are the landscape for another shared path of the welfare queen and the gay couple.

This time, there are two seemingly separate but connected agendas, and both promote marriage. The Rightwing's "pro-marriage" agenda comes with \$300 million from Bush for marriage promotion for those who receive welfare, initiating a distinction between good families (married) and single parents (welfare queen). For the last decade, the Right's web pages have been filled with concern about the breakdown of marriage, the need to keep gay marriage from weakening it further, and more importantly, with definitions of healthy families. They are set on a course to define narrowly what a legitimate family is and what support it can receive through church-based initiatives who deliver government benefits. The path leads to compulsory marriage granted by the state, delivering the benefits of small social units held under the authority of men and easily identified and controlled. Such units fit in nicely with the massive identification and surveillance of Homeland Security, whereas loosely woven, broadly defined families do not.

The "gay marriage" agenda seeks the full benefits of marriage at the moment when these benefits are disappearing through the loss of the social contract. The fight is for access to one's partner's insurance coverage at a time when insurance is dwindling, for access to one's partner's social security benefits at a time when social security is in complete jeopardy, for tax benefits when taxes are not the issue but services are. Framed as a civil right, this course seeks equality in a world that daily destroys economic justice and creates a fractured society. As does the Right's pro-marriage agenda, it calls for benefits, however few they might be, to be tied to legality and legitimacy, determined by the state.

LGBT engagement in the battle for marriage as a single focus risks missing the larger issue that surrounds it: how family is defined and, through that definition, who is determined to be legitimate in this society, who has standing, privileges, benefits. A narrow definition is based on state-determined legal status and includes who can adopt, who can provide foster care, who can retain custody, who can have in vitro fertilization, who is eligible for benefits—and ultimately, who has legitimacy as a full person in society. The Right's effort to restrict the definition of family far overshadows the agenda to enforce heterosexual marriage.

Because the relentless constitutional amendment campaigns have opened every door for discussion of marriage, we now have a chance to use the marriage debate to move toward a larger goal. We as LGBT people do not want to contribute to a more restrictive, authoritarian society, especially one that particularly targets African American single mothers. We can take

this moment to move the debate from marriage to the definition of family and the social contract. What, then, are some ways the LGBT community can move in concert to achieve common goals in a time in which the focus by the Right and our own people is on marriage? We can seize the moment and use it to shape what we want. Because the television sits at the center of most homes, this discussion of marriage is going on everywhere. There is no more silence or denial about the existence of LGBT people. Now is a rare moment of great opportunity to talk about every issue of importance to us.

Those issues are many, but I would place family high among them. This is not an argument for saccharine images of couples and children or for nostalgic images of two adults and children in a small house with a picket fence. Instead, it is recognition that our strongest social formations are small and are found in the ways we are bound to one another by commitment, love, loyalty, responsibility, and sometimes, but not always, biology. Worldwide, these formations are called family, tribe, clan—one's people. What we have called family in the US has been fluid over time. Today, what we know as family (but is not necessarily legally recognized) includes many configurations: blended families of married couples and their children and relatives from other marriages; LGBT couples, with or without children; grandparents raising children; single parents and their children; unmarried people and their chosen families of committed friends; nuclear families; unmarried people living together; unmarried individuals and their children; old people living together for companionship and economics; married or single people with adopted or foster children--families who always have room for one more, whether blood related or not.

What we have in common is that we all want recognition and respect for our relationships, the means to take care of each other, freedom from unjust authority, a legitimate place in our communities. To achieve these goals, we will have to develop some strategies such as these:

- Use our skills, born of necessity, for creating chosen families (we are experts);
- Broaden the definition of family within state agencies;
- Gain legal recognition of a wide range of relationships;
- Separate benefits and privileges from marital status;
- Work to establish a strong social contract that guarantees universal healthcare, genuine disaster relief, affordable housing, etc.
- Build a new cultural traditions for honoring relationships in ways that are not controlled by either the church or state;
- Join with others who face state opposition to their family composition and/or rights: immigrants, old people, single parents, former prisoners, battered women, poor people.

It makes sense that so many of us seek marriage because of our deep longing for public commitment or because of economic need. While a marriage strategy meets some of our individual short-term goals, we have the opportunity now to build a movement strategy that includes everyone and gives us much more. As Kay Whitlock (*In a Time of Broken Bones*) says, "We can follow a strategy that permits us to build bold, new relationships across many constituencies struggling for the integrity, stability, and security of many kinds of families and households. Far from being a tactical retreat, this approach stakes out new ground that permits us to forge new approaches to shattering the power of homophobic and racist "wedge" politics.

And it creates new terrain on which to engage countless faith communities that care passionately about economic justice. By its very nature, it deconstructs the lethal sense of 'us' and 'them' that have stalked the marriage wars."

Our efforts for recognition of our lives and our right to be free and fully human are intimately connected with others who suffer injustice and who struggle for fairness and human dignity. Why not take this moment to go for what we want for all of us: a free and just society that is inclusive and provides broadly defined human rights based on equality and justice. Why not include it all in our vision: our individual and collective right to food, clothing, shelter, education, health, a clean environment, a living wage, safety, and relationships of our choice.