OBSERVATIONS

The Cohabitation Blues

Kay S. Hymowitz

THIS PAST fall, the American Law Institute, an influential organization of lawyers, judges, and legal academics, published a huge, decade-in-the-making tome titled *Principles of the Law of Family Dissolution*.[1] The report's heft reflects its aspiration, which is to bring up to date an entire body of law that has changed little since Richard Nixon was in the White House. Among its many recommendations is a proposal that family-court judges and state legislatures treat the break-up of live-in partners much as they would that of a married couple, including, where appropriate, the division of property and the payment of alimony. As Grace Ganz Blumberg, one of the report's authors told *USA Today*, "If it looks like a marriage, it should be treated like one."

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this proposal was the great national yawn that greeted it. Of all the deviancies Americans have "defined down" over the past decades (to borrow the formulation of Daniel Patrick Moynihan), none has been so completely accepted as "living together." Once known as "living in sin" because of its defiance of religious strictures against premarital sex, or as "shacking up" because of its association with the supposedly vulgar ways of poor, rural folk, living together is now as respectably bourgeois as Chinese take-out for Sunday dinner.

Thirty years ago or so, young people fresh out of college tried every deception in the book to avoid telling their parents they were moving in with their boyfriends or girlfriends. To break the news, they had good reason to believe, would be to bring on weeping, wailing, disinheritance, possibly even a heart attack. I got away easily enough. My parents were worldly, Kennedy-era progressives, not the sort to make a scene about such things. After my big announcement, my father simply pursed his lips and refused to look me in the eye, while my mother knitted her hands, wondering whether my sullied reputation would ruin my marriage prospects. How things have changed. This Thanksgiving my parents welcomed into their guestroom my niece and her live-in boyfriend as if they were Uncle Joe and Aunt Millie.

My parents have not simply come to tolerate what people in the policy world call "cohabitation." It is not just another youthful fashion to which they have resigned themselves, like hip-hop music. Living together has become a settled part of their own social landscape. It is not at all unusual now to find widows and widowers of my parents' age who, whether to maintain a modicum of independence or to protect their children from inheritance hassles, are sharing condos in Fort Lauderdale with the blessing of neither clergy nor judge. Even nursing-home managers have been forced to accommodate themselves to the idea of coed roommates.

Still, it is the young and fertile who are most likely to share a bed and rent with someone of the opposite sex. This has led some observers to worry that the practice might further injure the institution of marriage, already limping along after the

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[1] American Law Institute, 1,187 pp., $145.00, $49.00 (paper).

assault of the divorce revolution. Other commentators have welcomed the trend. For them, the growing number of cohabiters is proof of the country's increasing tolerance for individual choice and "diversity." In their recent book, *Joined at the Heart: The Transformation of the American Family*,[2] Al and Tipper Gore make this case, citing cohabitation, gay parenting, divorce, and "blended" families as inspiring signs of American "creativity" and "resilience."

Neither side in this debate has it quite right. Americans may not be keen to put the sin back into living together, but that does not mean they consider marriage just one option among a smorgasbord of possible "lifestyles." They still see a clear distinction between matrimony and extramarital rent-sharing—and for an abundance of good reasons.

THE WIDE acceptance of living together has its origins in the convergence of several of the most powerful cultural currents of the 1960's. The sexual revolution and feminism played key roles, of course, as baby-boomers revolted against the stigma long attached to extramarital sex and proclaimed erotic fulfillment to be a personal right, for women as well as for men. But no less important was the rise of the knowledge economy. Younger members of the educated class found themselves needing more years of schooling and apprenticeship to establish themselves as the doctors, lawyers, and professors they increasingly wished to be. To meet the new demands of post-industrial career-building, they began not only to put off marriage—in 1960, the average age of marriage was twenty for women and twenty-three for men, while today it is, respectively, twenty-five and twenty-seven—but to redefine the early years of adulthood. The decade after college became a kind of post-adolescence, part middle-class independence, part high school.

Especially during the years before real-estate prices in the big cities skyrocketed, a recent female graduate could live in her own apartment like a grown-up while continuing to study, date, and "explore her identity" like a coed. If she met a great guy and began to sleep with him regularly, it made perfect sense for them to move in together. They could get to know each other better and decide later whether to make things permanent by marrying. In many cases, and despite predictions that living together would bring an end to bourgeois civilization, the couple did just that. Shacking up or no, 90 percent of baby-boomers got married—numbers little different from those of their grandparents—and it was only after they tied the knot that they went on to fill their Volvos with baby seats.

It is no surprise that today's twenty-somethings have adopted the arrangements invented by their parents. Career preparation has, in many cases, become an even longer grind, and real-estate prices have placed single-payer apartments out of the reach of most graduate students and entry-level workers. The 2000 census reports that the number of households with an unmarried couple grew by 72 percent over the previous decade; the increase since 1970 has been eight-fold. About half of the couples who married in the 1990's report living together before exchanging rings, and experts estimate that as many as two-thirds of Americans will live with someone of the opposite sex before they finally get hitched.

YET, AS numbers this vast suggest, the original baby-boomer script is only part of the story of what it means today to be young and living together. For one thing, as people have started to marry ever later—particularly the highly educated, who are often still single when their 30th birthdays roll around—the interests of men and women have diverged in troubling ways.

In my day, no one gave a moment's thought to the idea that men and women might have different biological agendas. This was not a problem when living together meant a few years of post-campus "self-exploration" and career development. But now it often drags on into the years when women begin nervously checking their biological clocks and when their boyfriends and potential husbands—being men—start to eye the next graduating class of girls arriving from Providence or Cambridge.

Stories abound about the female lawyer or stockbroker in her mid-thirties who finally recognizes, after living with her boyfriend for years, that he is not simply trying to figure out whether he is "ready to commit"; the guy is never going to marry her. As recent books like Sylvia Anne Hewlett's *Creating A Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children*[3] and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's *Why There Are No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman*[4] describe it, the practice of living together has carved out space for many young women to achieve their brilliant careers—and for many young men to behave badly. The title of the new book by Rick Marin says it all: *Cad: Confessions of a Toxic Bachelor*.[5]

Nor are broken hearts and ticking biological clocks the worst of the problems associated with cohabitation. Educated elites may have been the first to adopt the practice—and are largely responsible for its current respectability—but living together is actually far more common among those *without* college degrees.

For these Americans, living together is often a different matter en-

[2] Henry Holt, 417 pp., $26.00.

[3] Talk/Miramax, 334 pp., $22.00. See Lisa Schiffren's discussion of the book in "Lifestyles of the Rich and Infertile," COMMENTARY, July-August 2002.

[4] Broadway, 206 pp., $22.95.

[5] Hyperion, 284 pp., $23.95.

tirely: less an excellent post-adolescent adventure than an ambiguous and short-lived substitute for marriage, and one that frequently involves children. Over one-third of cohabiting households today include children under eighteen. In fact, much of the increase in the number of single mothers we have seen in the past fifteen years has involved young women in their twenties who are living with their boyfriends. Two of every five out-of-wedlock births are to parents who are cohabiting.

On the surface, this might appear to be a heartening trend; at least more children than we realized are living with their fathers. But a closer look at these households should dispel illusion. Cohabiting relationships, particularly those that do not culminate within a few years in marriage, are short-lived. Only a sixth of couples who live together do so for at least three years, and only a tenth for five years. A study of cohabiting couples conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development between 1984 and 1994 paints an especially troubling picture. While the share of children born to cohabiting couples doubled during that period, an increasing number of cohabiters were breaking up, and those who were not were even less likely to marry. Worse, many of these individuals were "serial cohabiters," moving from one live-in relationship to another. Today a full 70 percent of the children living with a cohabiting couple are the offspring of only one partner.

As the researcher Larry Bumpass has noted, even as divorce rates have leveled off in recent years, the growing number of cohabiting couples with children has hidden the true magnitude of the disruption that has taken place in American families. By just about every measure, and controlling for race and income, children living in these unstable arrangements are at risk: of academic failure, of dropping out of school, of early sex, of drug use. Indeed, there is evidence that when children live with their mother and a man who is not their biological father they are more likely to have such problems than when they live with their mothers alone. Girls in these arrangements are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse, victims of their mother's live-in partners and of what the *New York Post* has called "the boyfriend problem."

THESE FACTS might seem to require some qualification of any simple "approve" or "disapprove" answer when it comes to questions about living together. But there is still a tendency in some quarters to believe that when a taboo is broken, we are obliged to call it progress. This is the view taken by the American Law Institute in its ambitious proposals for overhauling the law of "family dissolution." "As the incidence of cohabitation has dramatically increased and cohabitation has become socially acceptable at all levels of society," the group's report declares, "it has become increasingly implausible to attribute special significance to the parties' failure to marry."

Even forgetting for a moment the question of children, this is an odd conclusion, if for no other reason than that cohabiters themselves see a special significance in their decision not to marry. The Alternatives to Marriage Project, an outfit founded by a "happily unmarried couple" named Marshall Miller and Dorian Solot, lists on its website any number of reasons why couples might not want to wed: the time is not right, they want to avoid divorce, they "don't want to become a wife (or husband)." Moreover, there is plenty of evidence that, on the whole, cohabiters behave differently from married couples, even beyond the fact that they end their relationships more quickly.

As Maggie Gallagher and Linda Waite summarize the research in *The Case for Marriage* (2000), cohabiters tend to lead more separate social lives. They keep their finances separate. They do not get insurance together. They are more likely to be unfaithful to their partners and to reject the ideal of fidelity. People who cohabit are, in sum, less likely to be seeking either permanence or interdependence—the very things that couples who marry say they want, even if they frequently fail to achieve them.

The truth is that, even after nearly a half-century of seeing marriage battered and ridiculed, Americans remain deeply romantic about the institution, precisely because it represents the stability and clarity otherwise missing in their lives. The conditions that have weakened the social and psychological credibility of pledging oneself to another "till death do us part" have only raised its imaginative value. Living together may represent youth, freedom, choice, openness to change—some of the qualities most prized by contemporary Americans—but marriage embodies solidity, dependability, and lasting memory, qualities longed for by human beings since they first recognized their mortality, and made all the more precious by the fickle, fevered spirit of our times.

Surveys show that the vast majority of Americans hope to marry and to remain married for life, and census figures project that some 90 percent of American men and women will eventually go to the altar. Among teenagers, an age group not exactly known for staid conventionality, 80 percent of girls and 73 percent of boys say that a good marriage is "extremely important" to their notion of the good life. The Fragile Families Project, an extensive study of inner-city out-of-wedlock births, found that even poorer cohabiting couples see marriage as quite different from living together, and that two-thirds of the mothers and three-quarters of the fathers in these households agree "it is better for children if their parents are married."

For further proof that Americans remain devoted to the ideal of marriage, one can also turn to popular culture. Not so long ago, the biggest successes on prime-time television were shows like *Seinfeld*, about a group of self-absorbed singles, and *Married with Children*, a sour send-up of married life. Now almost every night of the week one can turn to a "reality show" whose main theme is matrimony. The first offering several seasons ago was *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* This year we have had *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, and Fox's pricelessly titled *Joe Millionaire*. In all of these shows, a singleton seeks his or her future spouse among a crowd of young people who appear to have spent countless hours at the gym sculpting their triceps and abs, a plus for contemporary marriageability much as mastery of the quadrille was for Jane Austen's Emma. One can be sure that the millions who tune into these shows are not just hoping to see a couple decide to move in together.

MTV's hit series *The Osbournes* is another marriage-based "reality show" that, for all its puerile, gross-out humor, portrays the sort of happy, devotedly married couple that was supposed to have gone the way of Ozzie and Harriet. On another top show, *Will and Grace*, the female lead has spent years trying to find happiness living with her best friend, a gay man, and even prepared to have a baby by him. This fall the writers gave up on that conceit and married Grace off—to a Jewish doctor, no less—a move that won huge ratings. And last summer millions of Americans filled movie theaters to make a surprise hit of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Does anyone think they would have flocked to *My Big Fat Greek Commitment Ceremony*?

The problem with living together is not simply that it fails to satisfy the widespread longing, as well as the social need, for more permanent and stable unions. Normalizing cohabitation, not just as a way station between dating and marriage but as a suitable arrangement in which to rear children, threatens the best tradition of American individualism. Those who marry make a deliberate, considered choice. By announcing "I do" in public, they voluntarily impose limits on themselves, taking formal responsibility for a spouse and children. More than that, they commit themselves to mutual support, announcing to the wider community that they intend to be a self-reliant unit.

This is not the case with cohabiters. When they decide to live together rather than to marry, they make a very different choice: one *not* to take formal responsibility for their partners. This hardly means that all cohabiters are scoundrels (or that all married people are upstanding). But it does mean that the obligations of cohabiters are at best ambiguous, a situation that often leads to demands for the state to intervene.

As the American Law Institute reports, 20 percent of court cases having to do with family dissolution now involve cohabiting couples. At the same time, many of the self-appointed spokesmen for those who live together have urged that the U.S. follow the European model, especially by erasing any distinction between marriage and living together in the distribution of various public benefits. Though the irony probably escapes them, these are people who, having refused the solemnities of a state sanction for their relationships, insist on their right to the state's help when, predictably, those relationships begin to break down.

This is a step too far. Marriage is a promise, an "I will," involving duties not just to a husband or wife but to children, grandchildren, parents, the community, and even the state. Living together is at best a maybe, an "I might." It may not be deviant, but neither is it something to celebrate, in custom or in law.

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