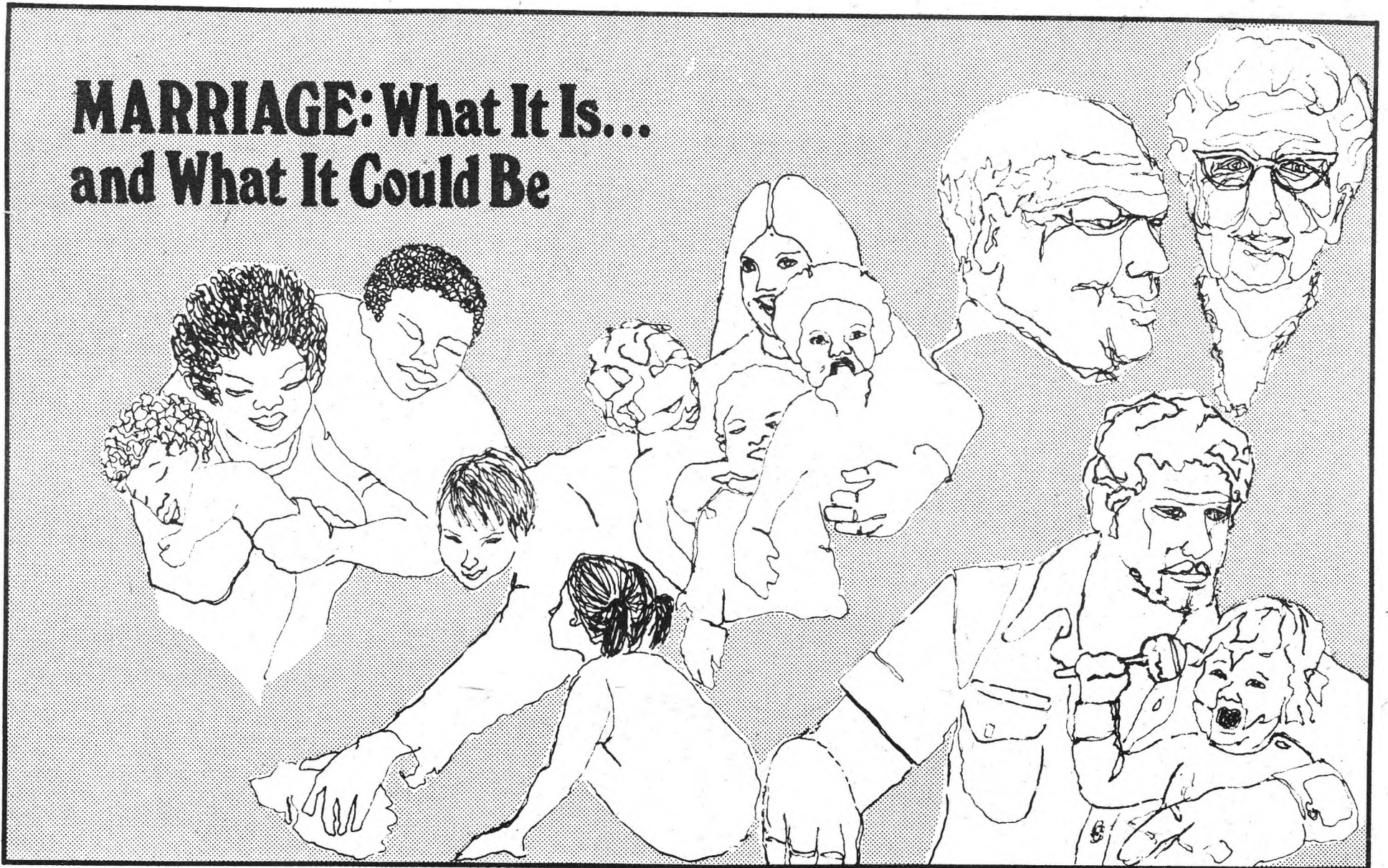


# MARRIAGE: What It Is... and What It Could Be



by SARA MURPHY

*My niece just got married. She's only ten years younger than I am, but you'd think she was raised on another planet! Not only did she and Tom live together for two years without the benefit of clergy -- but now that she is married, she still wants to use her maiden name.*

*In my day I was proud to become a Mrs., but with these young women's libbers it's Ms. And her father, my brother, he was crushed when she said he wasn't to give her away at the ceremony. She wouldn't be given away like a cow, she says.*

*But I must say, the ceremony was nice. A little hippyish for my taste -- love, honor and obey was good enough for me -- but they wrote their own vows, and were very sincere about them. Really, there's no reason why the woman should promise to obey him, but not the other way around. It's pretty confusing -- I don't understand what they really want out of marriage these days.*

It is confusing. Today all kinds of attitudes about marriage exist in our society. Alongside the traditional church ceremonies, we hear about open marriage contracts. Young couples live openly together. Women become mothers when they're not married, and are perfectly unashamed of the fact.

While these situations are far from being the norm in our society, there is no doubt that there is a widespread and profound questioning of the traditional views of marriage. Is marriage old-fashioned? If so, does that mean that love and respect and intimacy are old-fashioned? Is marriage oppressive to women? If so, how do you explain that most women want it?

If there were no such thing as marriage, what would take its place? Does women's liberation mean doing away with marriage? Does communism mean doing away with marriage?

## TWO SIDES TO MARRIAGE

We live in a capitalist society, a society in which private ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of labor are the dominant facts of life. Capitalism has its own logic which influences all the institutions in society, often in ways that are not apparent on the surface. Marriage is no exception. A marriage is not simply a matter of the intentions of the participants. It will reflect the pressures of social and economic forces beyond the control of the individuals involved.

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There are many positive reasons why people choose to marry. Two people care deeply about each other and want to build a life together. They want the emotional satisfaction that can only come from a durable relationship that is based on a deep commitment. They want to raise children. In its best expression marriage represents a commitment to these aspirations. And many marriages succeed in realizing them to at least some degree. The best marriages provide stability and emotional support for both partners and for their children.

These positive aspects of marriage are real but they are not the whole story. To see only this positive side is to romanticize marriage, which is precisely what the capitalist controlled culture does -- we are all familiar with the "happy family" of the Dick and Jane reader we used in school, of countless TV shows from *Father Knows Best* to *Eight is Enough*, and thousands of commercials and ads which picture cheery Moms and Dads going about the business of doing the laundry, baking cakes and mopping the floors (with the cheery Mom doing most of the work).

This empty, sentimental view of the institution of marriage flies in the face of life as we know it. It contradicts the reality that 2 out of 5 marriages end in divorce and countless others that survive are filled with conflict and unhappiness.

**Marriage has an oppressive side, based on the social inequality between man and woman, an inequality symbolized by the marriage itself which calls only on the woman to "obey."** In its worst expression, marriage means isolating the woman in the home with little contact with the broader life of society. The woman is economically dependent on the man and this economic dependence means that she is in a poor position to insist that the decisions of family be made equally by husband and wife.

Typically she will assume the burden of housework and the lion share of the responsibility for raising the children, not out of choice or agreement between equals, but because she is powerless to do anything else. Over the years the woman is driven down, denied an opportunity to develop her own ability to contribute to society beyond the home, denied independence and the self-confidence that goes with it. The man and woman live separate, parallel lives. They grow apart with little to discuss at the breakfast table except the bills. She's the housekeeper, He's the breadwinner.

Marriage is supposed to be based on love and the desire to share a life together. This ideal conflicts with reality. There are powerful economic and social forces that push us toward the altar and act to keep us married afterwards, particularly for women.

A good education and a decent job are harder to come by if you're a woman. This is even more true for working class women and triply true for oppressed nationality women. These restricted options naturally act as a pressure to marry and stay married. Women who resist this pressure face the difficult task of surviving in jobs that are treated as "pin money" or a second income by the employers. Many are forced onto the welfare rolls. Thus, for most women, the decision not to marry or to leave a failed marriage is not an easy one. It is not a simple matter of Do I love him, or not.

Added to these economic pressures are the various stigmas that are attached to remaining single in this society -- the "unwed mother", the "old maid" and the "Mama's boy." Those of us who for whatever reason choose to remain single are made to feel incomplete, inferior or weird.

At the same time the economic realities of capitalist society generate pressures towards marriage, the logic of capitalism also tears marriages apart. Family life is in crisis because capitalism provides no basis for a stable marriage relationship.

The inequality within the home is a constant source of conflict and instability. For working class families, the simple business of trying to make ends meet, often with both husband and wife working, is a huge burden on the marriage.

Husbands and wives fight over money. *Where did the paycheck go? Why don't you work more overtime? Work less overtime? Can't you save more? Get a job. Get a better job. Don't get a job, because who will make sure the kids stay out of trouble?*

The Black family is the clearest victim of capitalism's assault on family life. While the Black people have struggled for a stable family life since the times of slavery, the racist economic forces of this society have torn the Black family apart. Today, one out of every three Black families is headed by a woman. Marriages break up because the man leaves to find work, because the welfare system won't support children if a man lives at home,

because poverty and drugs and alcohol take their toll, because the criminal justice system imprisons the poor while the rich rob us every day.

While the oppressive features of marriage fall most directly on women, this situation does not come about because men want to lord it over women and reduce their wives to an inferior position in the family. It is true that men are taught and constantly encouraged to keep their wives "in their place"... to "wear the pants" and generally maintain a dominant position in the family. Naturally, the prevalence of these ideas strengthens and reinforces inequality. But these ideas are not the root of the problem. They are themselves reflections of forces generated by capitalist society. And even when men are free of these ideas, the economics of capitalism promote inequality.

To understand this thoroughly we have to analyze the origins of the marriage institution.

## HOW MARRIAGE LAWS ORIGINATED

Thousands of years ago, in primitive societies, the people lived communally. In some parts of the world, it's only been a few hundred years since the old communal ways have broken up. In these primitive societies, everyone shared the wealth of their clan or tribe equally. Nobody owned property, nobody worked for anybody else, nobody was rich at the expense of their neighbor.

Marriage in the sense that we know it did not exist in these societies. Families were based on a complex system of descent through the mother. But within the clan were couples who lived together, had a stable relationship with one another, were equal members of their society, and had children together.

Men and women had different kinds of tasks, but one was not seen as inferior to the other. Caring for the children and the household was seen as equal to the men's work of hunting. However, as wealth built up and the communal society began to break up into class society, it was men who owned the newfound wealth. For it was not in the household that the wealth was to be gathered, but in the domestication of animals formerly hunted, and in the trading of animals not needed for food, and eventually in the capture of slaves.

It did not happen overnight, but over  
(continued on next page)

# Marriage

(continued from previous page)

the years a situation developed where some members of the community were rich, others impoverished. The poor were forced to work for the rich, who became richer. War and trade and slavery were instituted. Class society was born.

What does all this have to do with marriage? Marriage was born at the same time. Since the new wealth of the family was held in private by certain men, and not communally as before, there was a need for strict inheritance laws, so that these wealthy men could pass their property on to their sons. Marriage laws were instituted to insure these inheritance rights.

So, within the marriage relationship, the woman was dependent on the individual man for her living. She was subordinate to him in every way. Strict laws of chastity bound her, while the man could do whatever he pleased. The double standard was born, and so was the concept of "legitimate" and "illegitimate" children -- those born of the marriage were the legal heirs, others were outcasts with no claim to the family or its property.

In this new institution of marriage, the wife was little more than a piece of property. In ancient Rome, for example,

a "patriarch" or father, had the power of life and death over his wife, children and other slaves. In fact, the modern word "family" originates from "familus" the Latin word for "slave" -- the original family being a "household of slaves" under the rule of the father or "patriarch."

Surely the status of women and the institution of marriage have come a long way from this ancient time. However, we still have with us many of the aspects of the "patriarchal family." We too, live in a class society and the laws, including the marriage laws, are based on a system of private ownership.

Capitalism requires and thus perpetuates marriage based on inequality. The capitalist class wants free labor in the home to raise up a new generation of workers. It wants women in a dependent position in the home in order to utilize them as a reserve army of labor, compelled to work for lower wages. The position of women in marriage and the economic forces that undermine family life are not "natural" or inevitable. They are the product of a definite social system and will disappear with it.

## MARRIAGE AND SOCIALISM

This points in the direction of the

solution. It is not a matter of getting rid of marriage.

Marriage can be and in many instances is a source of strength and fulfillment even in the present society. There may be more "ideal" forms of human relationships, but this is a matter of remote speculation that has little to do with the aspirations of the present generation of humanity.

The task is not to throw out marriage and the family, but to eliminate its oppressive features and strengthen its positive side. The marriage institution must be democratized. The inequality between man and woman within marriage and the economic compulsions that this inequality rest on must be removed. Marriage must become a free union between two equals.

Many of the struggles in our society today have real bearing on the character of marriage. Any victory for women's equality, whether it be opening up job opportunities, winning equal pay for equal work or affirmative action in education, puts women in a stronger position in relation to marriage. It means that women have more independence and thus are under less pressure to marry or stay

married because of economic compulsion.

The struggle for publically supported, readily available childcare, for more progressive laws, for the right to abortion... all these and other reforms are steps toward freeing marriage of its sexist features.

At the same time, as long as capitalism exists, the forces that make for unequal marriages and destroy family life will continue to wreak havoc. Only the abolition of capitalism and the construction of a socialist society can provide a real and durable foundation for marriage based on freedom and equality. Only with socialism can family life develop free of the destructive influences of poverty, racism and male supremacy.

**It is no accident that generally speaking, in socialist societies where there is not the economic compulsion to marry and divorce is easy to obtain, the actual number of broken marriages is far fewer than in capitalist societies. Freedom to choose and conditions that maximize the chances of a marriage working out go hand in hand.**

While socialism represents a step forward, it is not some paradise free of

(continued on page 18)

# MARRIAGE

(continued  
from page 13)

human conflict. The old ideas don't vanish overnight and the struggle to develop production to the point where all social needs can be met is a difficult and protracted process. Marriage under socialism naturally mirrors the problems of this transition. What is important to grasp is not that marriage is perfect under socialism, but that we see the positive features of marriage emerge as its dominant characteristic. Socialism puts forward a new vision of marriage and creates the conditions to realize it. The marriage law of the People's Republic of China sums up what the new marriage means:

*Husband and wife are duty-bound to love, respect, assist and look after each other, to live in harmony, to engage in productive work, to care for the children, and to strive jointly for the welfare of the family and the building up of the new society.*