

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Commitments to Marriage and Family* (Vintage Books, 1996), 224 pages

Reviewed by Michael Roesch

“Ideas are important in revolutions, yet surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the ideas that gave impetus to the divorce revolution” (pp. 3-4). Writing in the mid-1990s, about thirty years into the “divorce revolution,” social historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead points out a fundamental change in society that, oddly enough, has largely been ignored. Divorce, it was promised, would free women caught in bad marriages... but what actually happened? Whitehead presents a strong critique of the popular culture’s talking points on divorce, pointing out what actually led to the explosion in divorce rate in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as the effects it has had on families, individual spouses, and children.

The focus of Whitehead’s study is the change in what marriage and divorce mean for a couple, and how this change has affected the bonds between husband and wife, parents and children. Criticism of the American divorce rate in the public square almost invariably places the center of discussion on the legal shift to no-fault divorce. While an important part of the debate, especially because it effectively allowed one parent to unilaterally disrupt the other parent’s relationship with his or her children, this legal change does not comprise the main theme in Whitehead’s pages. Instead, she presents a full history of American divorce reflecting on the phenomenon from the nineteenth century onward, in terms not of its legal availability but rather of the predominant social circumstances surrounding divorce, and the reasons given for divorcing. A broader historical account (reminding the reader that divorce wasn’t suddenly invented in the 1960s) enables her to explain the shift to what she terms “expressive divorce.”

Whitehead places the rise of expressive divorce in the same cultural phase that saw a huge increase in the use of the therapy for the treatment of unhappiness rather than mental illness. In the first half of the twentieth century, the reasons people cited for divorce most commonly included economic hardship or the lack of financial support, and society balked at the idea of divorcing one’s spouse on the grounds of simple unhappiness. This changed after the Second World War, as people increasingly looked to the self for fulfillment. It was in this egocentric cultural milieu that divorce became a mode for self-expression and a tool for self-improvement. Especially for women, this new, *expressive* understanding of divorce meant a new capacity for taking control of one’s own life. Whitehead’s subjects talk of their newfound freedom and rebirth offered by divorce in almost sacramental terms (despite the fact that the prospect was not always for the better, as Whitehead shows, especially for poorer women and single mothers).

At the same time, institutions that had once been supportive of marriage were also caught up in the individualistic psychology of the age. Mainline ministers deferred to psychological methods when working with couples, and marriage counselors were trained to be neutral on the issue of divorce. Whitehead cites a therapist as saying, “We are in the business of saving individuals, not marriages” (p. 71). Perhaps most interestingly, Whitehead turns throughout the book to etiquette literature such as Emily Post to take the pulse of the culture’s attitudes on divorce. Where in the first half of the century the etiquette literature represented divorce as a failure, and even reinforced the taboos on it

while devising a proper way for divorced couples to behave and for others to behave toward them, by the 70s it was taken for granted as a societal norm and the focus was on how best to discuss it.

What Whitehead notes as missing from the thought of the culture during this drastic change in attitudes to divorce was the children. The prevailing thought at the beginning of the expressive divorce era was simply that children would be happier when they had happier parents, but it was abundantly clear by the time Whitehead was writing that this was not always the case. With a devastating array of statistics and anecdotal evidence, she argues for a re-centering of the divorce discussion around the party that is actually the most vulnerable: the child. She also spends some time discussing what she calls the “Love Family ideology” – a redefinition of family to de-emphasize the biological connection in favor of a voluntary bond or feeling. In this ideology, parenting becomes un-gendered (and, as she argues, therefore has an emphasis on the feminine) and other adult figures are expected to step into a child’s life, so that the absence of a father is not seen as a real loss. Most important in her analysis is the reduction of fatherhood in many families to a court-mediated cultural model “symbolized by three documents: the birth certificate, the child support check, and the sentimental greeting card” (p. 171).

In her conclusion, Whitehead’s prescriptions for the problem are somewhat modest. In addition to her constant advocacy for viewing the children as “key stakeholders in their parents’ marriage” (p. 190), she most notably calls for an increased understanding that marriage is not just about one person, or even two or a family, but the entire society. She believes that the first step is educating the public to understand that easy divorce represents a failure for our culture. Her own work is a good place to begin. Her analysis provides a strikingly complete, if secular, survey of divorce. In fact, though it is in no way dated, despite the decade and a half since its publication, new questions have arisen that would prompt us to take her conclusions even further. While many of the children of divorce have grown up to provide further evidence for her conclusions, and a large number of them are committed never to make the same mistakes as their parents, a widespread lack of trust in the permanence of marriage now causes issues at the *other end*. Increasingly, couples cohabit before marriage, or even decide to forgo it completely. One also wonders to what extent the issues of gender, fatherhood, and motherhood could even be discussed today in a popular secular work, as Whitehead does. *Divorce Culture* is an important, accessible work, bringing light to bear on the devastation caused to families by divorce, but it is only a beginning in the task of re-assembling a culture of marriage.

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