

**Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (Vintage Books, 2010), 271 pages**

**Reviewed by Daniel Meola**

Andrew J. Cherlin, professor of sociology and public policy at Johns Hopkins University, wants to know: Why do Americans still marry when they fail constantly at marriage? This question is responding to the doleful reality that approximately one out of every two American marriages today end in divorce, the highest rate of divorce in the world. Yet equally astonishing, 90% of Americans are projected to marry in their lifetime, one of the highest marriage rates in the world. Given the coincidence of these facts, along with the fact that cohabiting relationships end more quickly in America than elsewhere, Cherlin argues that what is most distinctive and unique about American relationships is their transiency. America holds the dishonorable mention of the most frequent relationship transitions worldwide; hence the title of Cherlin's book: *The Marriage-Go-Round*.

What causes “*marry-go-rounding*”? Is it a desire for something more and better, what Cherlin calls the “M-Factor”? Or is there something unique about American culture that idealizes *both* marriage and divorce? Cherlin thinks it is both. Based on historical research, comparative studies with other countries, and an analysis of other sociological data, Cherlin argues that religion and law are the primary causes of America's simultaneous idealization of marriage and ready acceptance of divorce. The “M-Factor” is mediated by these fundamental cultural influences. Both American religion and American law have traditional aspects, which encourage self-sacrifice and marriage, as well as individualistic elements, which (unintentionally, perhaps) foster divorce.

This may sound surprising, in view of Christianity's strong endorsement of marriage. Cherlin explains that the predominant Christian denomination in nascent America was Puritanism, which allowed divorce in cases of adultery and desertion. These exceptions differed from Catholic France or early Anglicanism in England, both of which prohibited divorce in every instance. (Even King Henry VIII never divorced, but rather obtained annulments through the Church of England.) Because of these Puritan exceptions, divorce was always legal in the New England colonies and remained legal after the revolutionary war, whereas it only became legal in Britain in 1857 and in France in 1887 (excepting the short period of the French Revolution, which introduced the first “no-fault” divorce). Moreover, Puritanism emphasized one's individual relationship to God and salvation by faith alone, which formed the basis for the later flourishing of individualism in America. Hence the irony: the Puritans, while proclaiming the sacredness and importance of marriage, planted what Cherlin calls the “seed of divorce” on American soil. This coincidence of a strong emphasis on marriage as well as on individualism is what Cherlin says makes American relationships so volatile.

Cherlin recognizes that Puritanism and early legal acceptance of divorce did not lead directly to America's later *laissez-faire* relationship ethos without the involvement of other factors. For instance, he identifies the industrial revolution, the sexual revolution of the 60s, and further changes in American religion and law as contributors to the high turnover rate in marriage. However, he holds that while these and other factors contributed to the dissolution of American marriages, it would be more accurate to say they *exacerbated* the religious and legal customs that were incipient at the beginning. The net effect of all these factors in America is that today marriage is not seen as the foundation of adult life, but as an “optional lifestyle,” which one can choose to enter and leave at one's individual discretion.

Indeed, Cherlin asserts that marriage today represents the capstone of a successful life. Instead of preceding financial stability, a successful career, a home and children, marriage now comes *after* these goals and represents their apex. Consequently, marriage has retained its appeal because it represents a status or an achievement. However, the reduction of marriage to a status means that it is unclear what marriage “does” for an individual. Not being needed for other goals, marriage seems to have become not only a status, but an *empty* status.

The “marriage-go-round” has caused a lack of stability for many families. Cherlin’s solution to this instability, especially for couples with children (the most vulnerable to instability), is not to “get married” but to “slow down.” In fact, Cherlin’s take-away advice for individuals is to discern more slowly if a person would be suitable as a cohabitation or marriage partner. Unfortunately, Cherlin’s solution disregards the objective difference between marriage and cohabitation in favor of an emphasis on stability in relationships. While he does indicate that *in practice* cohabitation is more volatile than marriage, he also posits that cohabitation could *in theory* be as stable as marriage (given the right conditions).

But is it true that marriage is the same as cohabitation? Also, would the promotion of stability outside marriage help to create more stable homes, or just repeat the same patterns that apply to marriage? That is, can a focus on stability alone, without any other criterion, really safeguard relationships from dissolving? Could not someone argue that he is leaving one relationship for a potentially more stable one? What will prevent a desire for stability from becoming the new excuse for abandoning a relationship?

To understand the objective difference between marriage and cohabitation and to develop a proper concept of stability as intrinsically tied to marriage, one has to ask if the essence of marriage is a social construction or if it is an order rooted in human nature. Cherlin indeed asks this fundamental question, opting for the “social construction” model because he equates nature simply with genetics. Marriage isn’t “natural” because it’s not in our genes, he says. But the reduction of nature to genes is arguable both scientifically and philosophically. Scientifically, systems biology has shown that “nature” involves a complex reciprocal interaction between the genes and the environment. Philosophically, in the Catholic tradition, DNA can be considered as the first ontological consequence of the soul informing a body from within. In this view, genes are expressive of a prior natural order within a person’s body, the order of the soul. Part of this natural order – inscribed in our very masculinity and femininity – is a call to communion in marriage. This order of the soul-informed body is then meant to be taken up into man’s freedom, helping us to see that marriage is rooted both in human nature *and* in freedom. One does not have to choose between nature and human freedom (social construction) as Cherlin does, but can have them both.

If it is true that marriage is grounded in our embodied nature and freedom, love by its very nature has an objective *telos* that couples *enter into* and don’t merely *determine* on their own. Consequently, marriage as the institution that embodies objective love *objectively transcends* the couple’s intentions of love and provides standards for them. Given its transcendence and objective form, marriage is different from cohabitation regardless of the flawed cultural instantiations of marriage that may make it look like cohabitation. Perhaps it is this *particular* type of stability, represented by a proper vision of marriage, which is neither practiced nor understood by many couples and social scientists (who see marriage as a mere product of society), that can save the notion of “stability” from being empty, or even from serving as an alibi for leaving a relationship. If this is correct, then we should understand the particular kind of bond constituted by marriage as the

*sine qua non* of stability.

While Cherlin's advice to discern and to enter relationships slowly should not be gainsaid, nonetheless it is insufficient and ambiguous for dealing with the cultural problem of the "marriage-go-round." The great achievements of *The Marriage-Go-Round* are its historical analysis of the root of the problems with marriage today in the beginning of America, its comparative study with Britain and France, and its chilling diagnosis of what marriage has become for vast numbers of people. Nonetheless, Cherlin's solution is fundamentally flawed because couples need not only to discern and enter relationships slowly, but to know what type of relationship they ought to be discerning and entering into. Indeed, given that Cherlin recognizes the Puritans' influence on America's cultural problems in relationships, it is surprising that he does not consider the meaning of marriage as crucial for remedying the pernicious individualism that fuels the "marry-go-round."

In the end, only by contemplating what marriage is in its full truth will one perhaps be able to understand that the deepest answer to the question "Why do Americans still get married?" is the truth of love grounded in human nature and freedom. If this is true, while Cherlin says "slow down," and others say "get married," the best advice is: "discover the beauty of marriage."

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