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# Unexpected Legacy

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**Judith S. Wallerstein**, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: The 25-Year Landmark Study* (Hyperion, 2000, 351 pages).

In her extraordinary study, Judith S. Wallerstein follows the children of divorce over the span of twenty-five years, asking how the pivotal event of divorce shaped their childhood, adolescence, and even adulthood. Methodologically, the sample size is small, and her conversations with children of divorce unscripted. Her interlocutors are the adult children of both divorced and "intact" families, including intact families that faced great difficulties and yet somehow managed not to divorce. Wallerstein chose families from the same neighborhood, so as to guarantee relative socio-economic parity: for the study to work, the defining difference had to be the fact of divorce.

Wallerstein wants to be able to go deeply into the lives of those she interviews, spending hours in face-to-face conversation, so as to get to "the human experience behind the statistics" (p. xxxvii). The book, as a result, is narrative in style, and easily accessible. The reader is invited to follow the stories of lives impacted by divorce, and to experience, with Wallerstein, the surprise that she herself experienced at the consequences of "culture of divorce." Thus the narrative style serves to reinforce one of the key theses of the book: that with the relaxation of divorce laws that took place in the 1970s, "[w]e embarked on a giant social experiment without any idea about how the next generation would be affected" (p. xxviii). And these effects, which are well documented, are serious: the children of divorce have a greater likelihood of behavioral issues in school; they engage in earlier, more frequent, and riskier sexual experimentation (p. 28); they are more likely to use drugs; they are less likely to go to college (p. 253); and they have a lower marriage rate and a higher divorce rate than their peers from intact families (p. xxix; see also p. 197). Divorce causes an emotional separation between parents and children (xxx). And contrary to the hope characteristic of this great "social experiment," these effects are anything but temporary, lingering for decades after the divorce and imparting a kind of indelible "stamp" upon the children: for the remainder of their lives, in their own eyes, they will always be children of divorce (pp. 62, 291). It is important to note that Wallerstein is not against divorce; but she does think that society needs to take an honest look at its expectations for and myths surrounding it, and admit that divorce creates a host of serious problems even as it tries to solve others.

The book explores, in five parts, the lives of five adult children of divorce, as well as a number of their peers from intact families. The parts are differentiated by the level of animosity between the parents, and by the effect of the divorce upon the children. It is not necessary here to summarize the structure of the book, which Wallerstein does well in her Introduction (esp. pp. xxxvii-xxxviii). Let us instead touch upon what is perhaps the most striking feature of the study, namely, the evidence that it provides in support of a particular anthropology.

In the first place, the anthropology supported by Wallerstein's study is one that gives pride of place to the family as possessing a structure. This natural structure is unique: a divorced family, Wallerstein asserts, is not the same family, but a new form of family, with different demands upon parents and children (p. 10). Divorce negatively and profoundly impacts family roles (pp. 126; 236-53). The divorce was viewed as the "end of childhood" for these children - in both the children's and the parents' eyes (p. 26; see also p. 11). In reminiscing upon their childhood, for instance, children of divorce rarely talked about their play - a fact that is all the more important when one considers the role that play has in how children explore imaginatively the adult world they will one day inhabit (pp. 18-19). Divorce further impacted gender roles: Wallerstein noted a sad pervasiveness of passivity among men who were children of divorce, who would simply sit back and let the women make the decision when their relationship got tough (p. 77). Women, too, came to adopt all of the most unhealthy traits usually associated with men: using their partners, exploiting them, manipulating them, and leaving them, all as an expression of a distorted form of power (p. 189). Such instances provide a kind of mirror-image proof that the family is characterized by a natural structure that retaliates upon both parents and children when it is violated. As with any distortion, these perversions of relationality and of one's place within a communion point in their negativity to truth: The family is a "school" where children learn what it takes to make a marriage (74).

A second, and related, feature of Wallerstein's anthropology is that the family, in its structure, has a cohesion, in which the whole is greater than the parts. For this reason, the children relate to their parents, not simply as individuals, but as a unit; the children's relationship with their parents is greatly influenced by how well the parents relate to one another. This is not only the case with good marriages: in bad marriages too, children feel protected by good parenting, which is the result of the two parents working together, even while at odds with one another (pp. 51, 242). This kind of cooperation is, in fact, essential for the development even of infants, who are able to grow and explore the world around them on the basis of the security provided by an intact marriage (p. 217). So universal is this need that it manifests itself even in divorces where the marriage suffered from domestic violence: the children often becoming abusers, taking on the role of the abusing parent in a bid to take power over the situation and restore life as it had been (p. 96; cf. p. 124).

Children, in other words, need parents with a strong marriage: we are dependent upon the stability of this relationship. Wallerstein says explicitly: "[children] want and need virtuous parents" (p. 287). We could say (though Wallerstein does not use these terms) that the impact that a strong marriage has upon the identity of the child illustrates that growing up is not about becoming "independent," but about learning self-gift (cf. pp. 32-3). Conversely, the parents' relationship with their children can also be affected by their relationship to one another: one father reported to Wallerstein that he had no feelings for his children because he had no love for his ex-wife (p. 140), and in families with children with special needs, the parents have a more difficult time after a divorce taking seriously the vulnerability of their child. A stable marriage, in other words, facilitates the parents' own call to be a gift to their children (p. 229).

Thirdly, this cohesiveness extends beyond the boundaries of the atomic family, giving us a sense of tradition and history. In the family we are connected to our past and opened up to our future. This sense of origin and finality is destroyed by divorce (p. 22). Particularly for younger children, the loss with tradition was experienced as the loss of the future: activities and studies lose their meaning - we could say, their *telos* (p. 171). When the children become adults, they are far less likely to have a close relationship with their parents, particularly with their fathers (pp. 82, 139, 203). Tragically, the children of divorce have less interest in their own parents becoming grandparents, a fact that Wallerstein compellingly interprets as a subconscious refusal by children to offer to their divorced parents the

grateful gift of the child, which is universally a symbol of the promise that the family will endure into the future (p. 68).

Fourth, the personal character of the individual is dependent upon the family. Divorce, Wallerstein argues, "objectifies" the children, a fact that is painfully experienced in arguments over visitation "rights" (pp. 176, 180, 182). Furthermore, divorce often replaces love with legalism, as seen in the case of fathers who refuse to pay for their children's college education. "I did all that I was legally required to do," is the common refrain (p. 252). Relationships, in other words, are dependent upon the family structure (p. 183). This is an important lesson for our society, which often protests that marriage is "just a piece of paper" that changes nothing essential about the underlying reality. In fact, love, which is characterized by generosity, requires a structure, a form, without which even the most fundamental relationships devolve into a form of justice that should govern the interactions of strangers.

An important question that Wallerstein leaves unasked, however, is whether the divorce culture is really a divorce *sub*-culture. In other words, it is tragically clear from her study what the effects of divorce are for those whose families are shattered by it. It is not clear what effects divorce has on those who do not go through it; in fact, one of the primary characteristics of her methodology, as we have said, is to contrast children from divorced families with those whose families are intact. What empirical evidence, therefore, is there for a "divorce culture"? How does the divorce of another family undermine the stability of my own? Unquestionably, the cultural transformations surrounding marriage in recent decades have been massive. Wallerstein's study could, in theory, provide important clues as to how.

