

Matrimony and Microeconomics A Critique of Gary Becker's Analysis of Marriage

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Of the economists who have influenced the direction of mainstream economic theory in the latter half of the twentieth century, Gary Becker tops the list. Professor Becker, more than any other economist of our time, has legitimized the application of neoclassical theory into areas previously considered unorthodox. Certainly other economists, many writing from the tradition of the Chicago School (as does Becker), previously examined areas such as crime, the family, and human capital; Becker brought these areas of study into the mainstream of microeconomic analysis. This is a significant accomplishment in a subject area in which most theorists are in agreement as to its major principles. For redefining this mainstream, Becker was certainly deserving of his Nobel prize in economics in 1992.

But while Becker's analysis of the family is the subject area for which he is most closely identified, it is also the area for which he is the most controversial. When Becker trumpets the role of economic forces in the development and operation of families, he suggests reasons why the development of nontraditional, non-nuclear families is congruent with economic laws, and why their development is to be expected today and even predicted in the future. For instance, Becker recognizes that the primary motivating factor in human action is self-interest, an indisputable basis from which to begin. Most economists accept the self-interest axiom in the development of utility-maximizing models of human behavior. But Becker takes this axiom a step further and asserts that utility-maximization applies to both market and non-market production. In this case, just as the individual who is not maximizing the profit received from market work is expected to search for ways to improve his return, even to the extent that he

might switch jobs, so, too, is there a tendency to make the same corrections in non-market utility maximization. Since this production occurs primarily in the home, it explains why people tend to get married and also why people tend to get divorced. People will marry when they think that they can achieve a greater degree of utility in that state than when single, and they divorce when they feel that they can achieve a greater degree of utility in that state than when married. Thus, just as neoclassical theory explains why individuals change jobs, it explains changes in marital status as well.

Becker is certainly correct in pointing out the primacy of economic laws in the ordering of the interpersonal relationships of both firms and families, but certainly the key to a spiritually happy and secure home life is somewhat more complex than the application of utility or profit-maximization analyses we normally apply to the study of individual and firm activity. Since his models possess predictive power, however, Becker's analysis can be extended to promote public provision of education or day-care services. For instance, because increases in human capital formation have resulted in increased incomes in the United States, state support for education is a self-justifying end. If single parents are hindered in the development of human capital, then state-financed day care can be (and is) similarly justified.

In this paper, I present Becker's explanation for the appearance of polygamy. In the same way that economic theory can predict the spread of polygamy, I argue that it can also explain its demise. I write this on the assumption that we are entering a time in which the practice of polygamy is going to receive a fuller hearing in our society, which has made great—some would say brazen—strides toward the redefinition of marriage over the last twenty years. Yet, it is no accident that the greatest areas of economic growth over the past one thousand years occurred in cultures that eschewed polygamy. By utilizing a non-mathematical approach in contrast to Becker, I hope to show that polygamy may be doomed to failure.

Professor Becker on Polygamy

Becker's presentation, which he supports with elegant equations and rather awkward graphs, formulates a neoclassical explanation for marriage.¹ This argument is that a single female will get married when she thinks that she can achieve a higher level of utility than she can by remaining single. The argument is equally valid for the single man. Becker includes in his analysis the concept of Z-goods, or some measurable quantity of utility that can be produced only in the home. The single female will choose mar-

riage when the expected Z_{married} is greater than the present Z_{single} . The non-market, household production of Z-goods is essential to Becker's argument, and it has become a staple of all Chicago-based analyses of the family. A single individual produces Zs when she cleans her house, makes meals, loans her house for social functions, engages and promotes friendships, and otherwise produces leisure. Of course, no individual or family consciously produces Zs, or for that matter, even knows what a Z is. The only conceivable explanation for including this concept into the analysis is to allow for the use of differential calculus. The fictional Z-goods can then be measured and maximized. When the single female is not maximizing her Zs, then she will attempt to change her marital status. Again, this applies equally to the male.

According to Becker, the mate-selection process takes place in a single market, which he calls the marriage market. This market can be any venue in which potential husbands or wives interact to display their talents, be it a singles bar on Saturday night or a church service on Sunday morning. It is in these settings that individuals, either consciously or subconsciously, compare the amount of Zs each can bring into potential relationships. The level of household production after marriage is the important point. Individuals can combine Zs to produce meals, a better living environment, and children. Note that the Z-good is a measure of both material production as well as psychic production. (While the production of children would be considered one of the Z-goods, so, too, would be the level of satisfaction one might receive when taking his child to get a haircut.) The amount of income one produces in the market is a major determinant of the quality of Zs one can produce in the home as well as bring into a relationship.

From here it is simple to deduce that not only will divorce take place when the expected amount of Z_{single} becomes greater than the amount of Z_{married} , but also that polygamous relationships will form when married individuals decide that they can produce more Zs with more than one spouse. When the amount of expected $Z_{\text{second spouse}}$ is greater than the amount of $Z_{\text{first spouse}}$, Becker's analysis predicts that we would see polygamous relationships develop in countries in which polygamy is legal. The same analysis applies to the decision of the polygamous individual with two spouses to seek a third, and so on. In any case, whenever individuals are not maximizing their Zs, they then enter the marriage market. (Of course, a married individual who chooses divorce in order to become single again would not enter the marriage market.) Becker argues that the situation is not altogether different in cultures in which polygamy is illegal. In those

cultures, a man who might normally take two wives would instead marry one, divorce, and then marry the other. Becker refers to this practice as “serial monogamy,” although it is hard to understand how it would be less prevalent if polygamy were legal.

The Economic Advantages of Polygamy

Polygamy as a dominant social order is more congruent with the human reproductive structure, and as such one might have expected it to be more socially acceptable today. After all, the female possesses one egg per month and the male many sperm, implying that the marginal values of each vary according to gender. Since the female faces the biological role of nurturing the fertilized egg at least until birth, it is in her best interest to choose men whom she believes are most likely to make a long-term commitment to the nurturing of the baby long after he or she is born, whether or not the male is already married. The pro-polygamy argument is that men who are able to make this commitment should be allowed to enter into as many of these contracts as are desired. Such a market for husbands and wives is more efficient from the perspective of the propagation of the species, as it enables men who are capable and willing to have children have as many as they want, and at a faster rate. As such, the current monogamous system contradicts Western notions of individualism and economic liberty.

We tend to see polygamy—when a man takes more than one wife—occur in societies in which women outnumber men, while polyandry—when one woman takes more than one husband—occurs when men outnumber women. We are usually concerned with the former case because it is almost universally true that women outnumber men. In that case, the number of available husbands in the marriage market is limited. Since it is in the woman’s interest to find a husband who will commit himself to her beyond the conception of her children, any social arrangements that force the husband to do this is essential not only for the formation of families and communities but also for the propagation of the human race. Therefore, the elevation of marriage to a sacramental status by the Church in the early years of Christianity was essential for the development of the West, whose culture was defined by the Church when the Dark Ages receded.

The availability of husbands is, therefore, more important for women when they outnumber men. In a culture that enforces monogamy, marriage effectively removes men from the marriage market. The supply of available husbands is already less than the supply of available wives;

monogamous social orders reinforce that disequilibrium by restricting men from entering into additional marriage contracts after marrying once. When women outnumber men, it would be in the interest of some women to enter into such contracts. Otherwise, women who want to get married but are unable to do so due to the lack of men in the marriage market would have an avenue to engage in marriage contracts with willing men. Following Becker's analysis, such contracts will be entered into when the opportunities to achieve a higher level of household production are possible. Marriage does not remove men from the marriage market in societies that recognize polygamy. Indeed, in monogamy-based societies with high rates of divorce, marriage does not permanently remove men from the marriage market either. Beckerian analysis suggests that this increased availability of divorce is a recognition of the economic laws at play within the marriage market.

The excess supply of women in monogamous societies who want to get married and are unable to do so suggests that the price imposed on men who want to get married by societies with the excess supply is too high. (Becker calls these prices "shadow prices," and they refer to any characteristics in individuals in the marriage market that guide participants in that market to marriages that maximize their well-being.) The number of women willing to get married—that is, willing to supply themselves for marriage in the marriage market—is greater at the higher price. This follows the law of supply, which explains the positive relationship between price and supply in any economic market (and is shown graphically by the upward-sloping supply curve). But the demand at that price is not sufficient. There are not enough men willing to demand marriage at that price. Microeconomic theory suggests that this excess supply of available women will disappear when the price is allowed to decrease and the market then clears.

Polygamy also enables individual participants in the marriage market to capitalize on the division of labor. Some individuals would be able to focus their energies on various aspects of household production in which they have a comparative advantage, freeing up others to provide income for the household.²

In summary, Becker's approach is that of applying the tools of neo-classical economics to the decision to marry. The conclusion is that the individual's decision to marry (and then the decision to engage in either monogamy or polygamy) depends on the application of profit-maximization techniques employed by firms in order to determine the optimal output of household production.

Polygamy's Future

The primary benefit of monogamy relates to its connection to the formation of the nuclear family, which is the primary nurturing unit of our society. The nuclear family provides stability to a child's environment, contributing to safer communities and enabling him to develop into a functioning member of society. The stability that results from this order has positive economic consequences, as employers face a labor supply that is more concerned that relationships with employers are successful. From the commitment made by the parents in nuclear families comes stability that flows from the family to the community. One need only look to the crumbling social structure of U.S. inner cities and the concomitant lack of such commitments to see the economic consequences of the rejection of monogamy.³ In monogamous relationships, parents make long-term commitments to fewer children. The result is a higher marginal product of time spent with fewer children who, in turn, benefit from the opportunity to develop greater human capital.

Most Americans take legal requirements of monogamy for granted, but as our economy changes and women are allowed to develop more capital, the economic ties that underlie monogamy weaken. As a result, the traditional marital union becomes less common. Since there is nothing expressly written in the U.S. Constitution requiring monogamy, it will only be a matter of time until polygamous relationships (as well as other non-traditional marital unions) are legally accepted. Arguments that bolster the cause of single-sex marriages in the states are equally valid for the legal promotion of any nontraditional marital union.

It is my contention that if polygamy becomes legally sanctioned in the United States some sectors of the population would undoubtedly benefit, but the attendant problems that would arise would be overwhelming. The shortage of available women would cause serious social dislocations for low-class males. New markets, offering alternative forms of sexual gratification, like prostitution and pornography, would emerge. A dowry system might be organized to reflect this shortage, exhibiting an increasing marginal cost of the last eligible partner. Those who could not afford the dowry might engage in violence in an effort to assert themselves. As these social consequences hinder free economic exchange, strong social forces would result that make polygamous relationships an especially unattractive option.

In fact, these social forces are occurring today. The emergence of the Christian Right or of calls for "family values" reflect not so much a desire to

return to seemingly more placid times in U.S. history (although that is undoubtedly its appeal to many), but rather, an effort to reassert a social structure that is congruent to the formation of a political economy that is somewhat more stable and predictable. There are economic incentives to promote such social structures. It is the inherent commitment in monogamous unions that provide the stability necessary for this environment. The incentives for safe and healthy communities, for long-term intergenerational planning, and for the development of human capital, are much greater when the expected marginal benefits from another child are shared among one set of two parents. Current efforts to lessen the effect of no-fault divorce laws in the states acknowledges the economic costs caused by the breakdown of the family over the last thirty years.

In the end, the proof of the economic efficacy of monogamous commitments is exemplified in the study of those cultures that promote each system of social contract. That monogamy-based economies exhibit more dynamism is apparent. Many societies in the East have long-standing cultural ties to polygamy; these societies (and their economies) have not experienced extensive functional change in four hundred years.

While polygamy proves itself to be more effective in terms of reproduction, it results in an inefficient social order that is characterized by an unequal distribution of available mates. The economic dislocations from this distribution would prove so great that the resulting tension would produce a new social structure that would make polygamous relationships an unacceptable choice. Such analysis is not included in the Beckerian model because it is not subject to quantification. It explains, however, why societies based on the promotion of economic and cultural development will not choose the polygamous option for very long. Emerging social and economic costs will cause a new emergence and a new appreciation for monogamous commitment.

Notes

¹ Information on which this paper is based can be found in Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991 [1982]), 80-107. In presenting Becker's argument, I purposely avoid his mathematical equations for matters of simplicity.

² This aspect of polygamy was expressed in a recent newspaper article (*The Washington Times*, August 8, 1997) about a Utah woman who found her polygamous relationship to benefit her professionally. Speaking to a convention of the Utah National Organization of Women, Elizabeth Joseph, a career lawyer, instructor, and news and public affairs director at two radio stations, said "I've maximized my female potential without the tradeoffs associated with

monogamy. [I was] able to go to law school 400 miles away, knowing [that my] husband had clean shorts in the morning and dinner at night.”

³ See, for example, Charles Murray, *Losing Ground* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 124-46, for strong evidence of the inverse relationship between family breakdown and economic development.