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1 – THE UPWARD MOBILITY GAP

According to the Brookings Institution, more than two-thirds of children born into low-income households grow up to earn a below-average income, and only 6% ever make it into the top one-fifth of income earners. Why is there an upward mobility gap in America, land of opportunity? According to Doyle McManus, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, the culprits are globalization, the decline of public schools, and the decline of intermarriage between people of different classes.

Increasingly, he notes, college-educated Americans live in a different country from those who never make it out of high school. As a group, adults with college degrees have an unemployment rate of 5%, steady or rising incomes, relatively stable families (their divorce rate declined over the last 10 years) and few children out of wedlock. Adults without a high school education, by contrast,

face an unemployment rate over 15%, declining incomes, a higher divorce rate, and have lots of kids out of wedlock. (Among black women who didn't finish high school, 96% of childbirths are outside marriage; among white women who didn't finish high school, 43%).

Can anything improve this troubling picture? It is now acknowledged across the political spectrum that people who do just three things – complete high school, work at any job, and not have children out of wedlock – will not be in poverty and have a pretty good chance of making it into the middle class. Not easy, but simple. How do we help young people understand that? McManus concludes the government must expand its efforts to improve public schools, but as the reader will see below, that may be an obvious answer that's obviously wrong.

2 – BAD STUDENTS, NOT BAD SCHOOLS

From *Bad Students Not Bad Schools* (2010), by Robert Weisberg:

- Academic achievement requires intelligence and motivation. School resources, pedagogy and instructional quality are important but secondary. Unfortunately, both liberal and conservative reformers have ignored brains and work ethic and concentrate on secondary factors.
- “Bad schools” are not created “bad.” Indifferent, anti-intellectual, often violent students make schools bad, and pouring in more resources will fix nothing unless the students themselves change.

- Academic achievement requires motivation, and today's educators foolishly believe in making learning fun and “relevant.” This approach is doomed. Learning inescapably involves pain, and without a struggle, personal advancement is impossible. Substituting cheap self-esteem to avoid agony is particularly harmful to the intellectually less able.
- American educators have long obsessed over closing racial gaps in learning and every attempt, regardless of the billions spent or tactics, has come up short. More important, trying to close these gaps undermines learning

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for both whites and blacks. The futile effort will only dumb-down education so as to provide the illusion of progress.

- Recent efforts to uplift the least able students have harmed smart kids. Programs for the intellectually gifted have been decimated under No Child Left Behind. This is the opposite of what occurred in the late 1950s and early 60s when the US responded to Sputnik by concentrating on bright students. What rescues America from self-imposed education collapse is importing smart youngsters plus scientists born overseas. This may not last forever.
- Reformers often insist that education should be treated as a business with clear standards and strict accountability to insure progress. Total nonsense. The parallel is inappropriate – you can't "fire" non-performing students no matter how rotten or disruptive. The business-like

infatuation on test scores and accountability almost inevitably subverts quality education and promotes cheating.

- School choice – vouchers and charter schools – infatuates "conservative" educators. This approach has seldom succeeded. More important, it falsely assumes that if students and parents were given ample choice, they would crave academic excellence. More likely, they prefer sports and country club-like facilities, not tough academics.
- Education spending has sky-rocketed with little to show for these billions. Reformers misunderstand what today's fixes are about. Schooling has become the reincarnation of the 1960s Great Society, a cornucopia of social welfare jobs and contracts. It is less about boosting learning than securing the social peace by preventing urban unrest.

3 – WHEN MARRIAGE DISAPPEARS

Among the affluent, marriage is stable and may even be getting stronger. Among the poor, marriage continues to be fragile and weak. But the most consequential marriage trend of our time concerns the broad center of our society, where marriage, that iconic middle-class institution, is foundering. Marriage is in trouble in Middle America.

So finds Brad Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, in his latest report. The numbers are clear; over the last 30 years:

- Among "Middle Americans" (the 58% of moderately educated Americans who have a high school degree), the proportion of children born outside of marriage skyrocketed from 13% to 44% while the portion of adults in an intact first marriage dropped from 73% to 45%.

- Among financially well-educated Americans (the 30% who have a college degree or higher), the proportion of children born outside of marriage climbed only slightly from 2% to 6%, the divorce rate dropped from 15% to 11%, and intact first marriages dropped from 73% to 56%.

In sum, the relationships of Middle Americans increasingly resemble those of the poor, while marriages among upscale Americans are getting better in many respects.

MARRIAGE AND THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

The retreat from marriage in Middle America cuts deeply into the nation's hopes and dreams, writes Wilcox. He believes that if marriage is increasingly unachievable for our moderately educated citizens, then it is likely that we will witness the

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emergence of a diminished society. For a substantial share of the United States, economic mobility will be out of reach, their children's life chances will diminish, and large numbers of young men will live apart from the civilizing power of married life.

MARRIAGE-RELATED BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS

Three cultural developments have played a particularly noteworthy role in eroding the standing of marriage in Middle America, writes Wilcox. First, the attitudes of the moderately educated have traditionally been more socially conservative on a cluster of marriage-related matters, but they now appear to be turning more socially permissive, even as highly educated Americans have become more likely to embrace a marriage-minded mindset.

The second cultural development that has helped to erode Middle-American marriage is that these Americans are more likely to be caught up in behaviors – from multiple sexual partners to marital infidelity – that endanger their prospects for marital success.

The third cultural development that has played a role in eroding the standing of marriage is that moderately educated Americans are markedly less likely than are highly educated Americans to embrace the bourgeois values and virtues – for instance, delayed gratification, a focus on education, and temperance – that are the *sine qua nons* of personal and marital success in the contemporary United States.

THE RETREAT FROM INSTITUTIONS

The retreat from marriage in Middle America is not only a consequence of the changing cultural contours of American life. Shifts in the economy and civil society also appear to have played an important role – especially the growing disengagement of moderately educated Americans from the institutions of work and religion. Concludes Wilcox:

Marriage is a middle-class institution that provides stability and security for family life against the hustle of the market and the bustle of a dynamic society. It is one of the great social tragedies of our time that marriage is flourishing among the most advantaged and self-actualized groups in our society and waning among those who could most benefit from its economic and child-rearing partnership.

If marriage becomes unachievable for all but the highly educated, then the American experiment itself will be at risk. The disappearance of marriage in Middle America would endanger the American Dream, the emotional and social welfare of children, and the stability of the social fabric in thousands of communities across the country. We know, for instance, that children who grow up in intact, married families are significantly more likely to graduate from high school, finish college, become gainfully employed, and enjoy a stable family life themselves, compared to their peers who grow up in non-intact families.

Given the current trends, it is not too far-fetched to imagine that the United States could be heading toward a 21st century version of a traditional Latin American model of family life, where only a comparatively small oligarchy enjoys a stable married and family life – and the economic and social fruits that flow from strong marriages. In this model, the middle and lower-middle classes would find it difficult to achieve the same goals for their families and would be bedeviled by family discord and economic insecurity.

This is why the nation must now turn its attention to reviewing and renewing the economic, cultural, and civic conditions that sustain strong marriages and families for moderately educated Americans, who still constitute the majority of citizens and have long been a bastion of conventional family life in the nation.

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4 – MILLENNIALS AND HOPE

Another view is offered by Joseph Lawler, managing editor of *The American Spectator*, who writes in the current issue that the idea that the middle class is in a “slow-burning crisis” is badly overstated. Middle-class college graduates must be doing fine, he surmises, if, as a recent *New York Times* article on the subject relates, they are turning down starting salaries of \$40,000!

The economic downturn has certainly caused widespread hardship, Lawler writes, but it would be a serious mistake to attribute the country’s economic woes to a prolonged erosion of middle-class opportunity. The fact that the American economy still provides opportunity on a vast scale should be evident from what Americans themselves are saying about their prospects. In early 2009, at the depths of the recession, the Economic Mobility Project, an initiative funded by Pew Charitable Trusts, commissioned a survey of Americans’ economic sentiments. The poll showed that 58% of people aged 18-29 thought that they would have an easier time moving up the economic ladder than their parents did. Seventy-two percent of those polled thought that their economic circumstances would be much or somewhat better in 10 years. Seventy-nine percent expressed confidence in the possibility that people could improve their economic standing even during the recession, and among youth the number rose to 88%.

They could be all wrong, but optimism in the face of uncertainty should itself be considered a strength of American society!

This clear expression of optimism among young workers conflicts with the grim trends echoed endlessly throughout political commentary, notes Lawler. The reason the polls don’t reflect such sentiments is that those malign developments are overblown, and are to a significant degree artifacts of the way statistics on income and inequality are kept.

For instance, economic mobility – the ease with which young workers move up the economic ladder – is as healthy as the polls would suggest. While it is true that middle- and lower-class wages have not progressed as they did a couple of generations ago, about 65% of children go on to out-earn their parents, including 80% of those in the lowest income quintile, according to a study by Julia Isaacs of the Brookings Institution.

It is hard to reconcile the fact that young generations are still advancing economically with the general phenomenon of stagnating wages until one factor is taken into account: immigration. Because immigrants earn less on average than others, including them in the sample makes it appear as though mobility is not as prevalent as it really is.

Minnesota Federal Reserve economist Terry Fitzgerald, in a contrarian 2008 paper, separated some of the frequently repeated misleading facts from the reality that the middle class has made steady gains. A key finding was that while households in the middle of the distribution have fallen behind top-earning households since the 1970s, in fact almost all households have enjoyed substantial income gains since then.

Of far greater concern for the future of American society, writes Lawler, is the plight of those in the younger generation who are not established, who come from the lowest income bracket. After all, he offers, these are the people to whom the American Dream relates.

Sadly, concludes the author, the federal government’s interventions and redistribution on behalf of the middle class, i.e., the voting class, undermine the prospects of the next generation of workers starting from nothing.