

21st Century Marriage in America (Editorial Comment)

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Abstract:

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Article:

In the inaugural issue of *Journal of Marriage and Family*, scholars underscored the central importance of marriage for individual and family well-being and advocated for the creation of federal programs to better support marriage in the United States (e.g., Burgess, 1939; Goldstein, 1939). Similar dialogues about marriage in America continue today despite the significant social changes that defined the latter half of the 20th century as a period of marital “deinstitutionalization” (Cherlin, 2004) or the “world-historic transformation” of marriage (Coontz, 2004). In his book, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and Family in America Today*, Andrew Cherlin (2009) tackles the paradox of 21st century marriage in America. That is the unwavering endorsement of marriage as a desired goal (Axinn & Thornton, 2000), even among those individuals who may be least likely to marry (England & Edin, 2007) or are excluded from marriage (Walker, 2004), is juxtaposed with marriage rate declines, increases in nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing, the postponement of marriage, elevated divorce rates, and historically unprecedented options for organizing couple relationships and reproduction in the United States (Coontz). In perhaps the most comprehensive account to date, Cherlin advances the thesis that this very juxtaposition uniquely situates contemporary American marriage. To continue the dialogue Cherlin has begun, I invited two leading scholars recognized for their contributions to the study of divorce, marriage and family transitions—one a sociologist, the other a psychologist—to comment on the contributions of *The Marriage-Go-Round*. In offering their own take on Cherlin’s conclusions, Paul Amato and Mark Fine extend an important discussion on marriage in America that is likely to continue well into the 21st century.

Heather M. Helms, Book Review Editor ¹

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