

Continued from cover

years ago that the long march to equality between men and women began. This “love revolution” was controversial among social conservatives, who said love was a threat to marriage.

“They worried about how they would get the ‘right’ people to marry each other and they worried about what would happen to authority relations,” said Coontz. “Their horror was quite justified. The divorce rate has risen steadily ever since then.”

Today, according to Coontz, marriage has become fairer and more fulfilling than in the past but also more optional and fragile. “Historical change has been for better and for worse,” Coontz said. “It has destabilized marriage as an institution, but it has given people more options.”

Coontz—author of five books on marriage and family life and director of research and public education for the Council on Contemporary Families—noted that most people still marry but wait until they are older. Women can support themselves without a husband, and birth control has made it possible for young people to live together outside of marriage.

She likened the “love revolution” in marriage to the Industrial Revolution, in terms of the momentous impact both had on society and individuals. Expectations are higher, and couples work harder to have a good marriage. Nonetheless, people are also more willing to walk away from an unsatisfying marriage, asserted Coontz, whose most recent book is *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*.

“Marriage today, when it works, works better. It’s fairer, more fulfilling, more passionate, more loving than [it was for] any of the individuals whose diaries I read and records I read . . . could ever have dared to dream,” Coontz said. “But the same things that make it so much more satisfying are the ones that make it more optional,



“Marriage for thousands of years was not about love or intimacy.” It was about politics, property, and male dominance.

Stephanie Coontz

more fragile, less bearable when it doesn’t work.” Marriage as an institution became weaker because people could leave a marriage that wasn’t satisfying, she said.

Most people do still marry but at much older ages than in the past. And they feel free to conduct

their sex lives outside marriage. The presence of birth control makes couples worry less about pregnancy and also feel less compelled to enter a shotgun marriage if they do become pregnant. “All of these things have created not the new diversity but the new legitimacy of diversity that we see in married life today,” she said.

“Marriage today has to be based on deep friendship and greater negotiating skills than ever before,” she said. And it is not confined to couples in America. “There is this world historic change in what people want,” she said. “One of the things we’re seeing internationally is that this love revolution has a real attraction that crosses class lines and culture lines.” She noted that in Swaziland, where most marriages are still arranged by families, newspapers carry personal love ads. And in Saudi Arabia, a law was passed last year that made it illegal for a man to force his daughter to marry.

Change occurs at different rates and in different ways, depending on traditions and cultures. As Coontz pointed out, “Everywhere, what we’re seeing is the decline of the power of the older generation, including parents, to dictate their choices to their children. And we’re also seeing an increase in the independence of women, except Afghanistan under the Taliban and now in Iraq. So this is changing marriage everywhere.”

Rather than long for a return to “traditional marriage,” which often was unhappy, Coontz said, the focus should be on helping couples learn how to build a successful marriage together. Because anything short of that is wishful thinking. ■