

# Democracy, polygamy and the sexual constitution

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It had to happen. After giving legal sanction to easy divorce, single motherhood, common law relationships and homosexual "marriage," our society was bound to challenge the last remaining taboo — polygamy. Columnists and editorialists, not least at the *National Post*, are expressing the pseudo-libertarian view that the law against bigamy should be repealed. After all, it's just another lifestyle choice among consenting adults, isn't it?

Or is it? In fact, the historical record shows that monogamy, like private property, is indispensable to constitutional democracy. Because the political system is part of society's larger breeding system, every political constitution depends upon a sexual constitution. The relationship between democracy and monogamy needs to be appreciated lest we thoughtlessly destroy the foundations of constitutional democracy.

A few facts: Constitutional government has emerged only in societies where monogamy was the legally enforced, or at least the commonly observed, social norm — ancient Athens, republican Rome, and Western Europe and North America. The modern adoption of constitutional democracy in non-Western societies such as Japan and India has been accompanied by the parallel acceptance of monogamy. Those regions of the world where polygamy is still practised (sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East) are precisely the areas where constitutional democracy has made the least progress.

Of course, there are countries, such as the People's Republic of China, where polygamy has been abolished without leading to the introduction of democracy. Monogamy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democracy. That is, monogamy does not guarantee democracy, but you will certainly not get democracy without monogamy.

Why this relationship? First, polygamous societies are highly unequal. Wealthy males control large amounts of property so they can support and sequester desirable females. (Polygamy in practice is almost always polygyny, the marriage of one man to more than one woman; polyandry, the marriage of one woman to several men, is rare). Since Aristotle, political theorists have pointed out that extreme inequality is a deadly foe of constitutional government.

The effect is compounded when a small elite monopolizes not only property, but also reproductive opportunities.

Second, the practice of polygamy produces large numbers of surplus males. As they search for reproductive opportunities, they are likely to become criminals or to be hired as soldiers, militiamen and retainers of wealthy polygamists. The most likely result is a brutal society dominated by a warrior cult of violent masculinity — unpropitious conditions for democracy and the rule of law.

Third, polygamy turns women into a form of private property — little more than bargaining chips in alliances between families — and renders the sequestration of women in the private realm almost inevitable. Under such circumstances, it becomes impossible for women to raise their children as democratic citizens. If for no other reason than the effect of polygamy upon women, feminists in the Western world should rise up and stamp out the movement to legitimize it before it really gets underway.

I don't want to sound like Chicken Little proclaiming that the sky is falling. It will take more than a few polygamous marriages among trailer-park trash in Utah to bring down democracy. Society can withstand many deviations as long as the norm of monogamous marriage remains respected and socially effective.

Yet legal endorsement is required. Without it, polygamy will be portrayed in the media as just another lifestyle choice, just as homosexuality is now. But the two are not comparable. Social approval or disapproval can, within certain narrow limits, make the practice of homosexuality more or less common; but it will always remain relatively exceptional in comparison to the human norm of heterosexuality.

Human beings, on the other hand, easily learn to practise plural marriage. More than 80% of historically recorded societies have been polygamous. It is possible to maintain monogamy as a social norm, but not without effort. It requires religious and moral teaching as well as the imposition of legal sanctions and social stigmata.

As a political scientist, I will leave the intrinsic value of different forms of marriage for others to discuss. Let me simply summarize the historical evidence. Constitutional democracy is the best form of government ever developed, but it cannot exist in a social vacuum. It flourishes only where monogamy is "normal" in both senses of the term — as the most common form of marriage in practice, and as the norm held up by society for imitation.

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