**The courage to be on the wrong side of history: Lessons from Burke and Nietzsche**

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 Millennials who stand up for family, marriage, and the foundational institutions of civil society make possible a new cultural counter-revolution. The question is, will you join it?

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*Editor’s note: This article originally* [*appeared*](http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/06/14488/)*June 18 at Public Discourse, the online journal of the Witherspoon Institute—eight days before the Supreme Court* [*ruled*](http://www.worldmag.com/2015/06/supreme_court_legalizes_same_sex_marriage) *on same-sex marriage and the release of Marvin Olasky’s*[*cover story*](http://www.worldmag.com/2015/06/blindsided) *on churches facing the LGBT juggernaut. It is reposted here with permission.*

It seems that the Supreme Court will probably strike down the conjugal marriage laws of our states. It seems Anthony Kennedy may have finally made up his mind that Aristotle was wrong in the first book of his *Politics*. Things are beginning to feel like a game of chicken: get out of the way now, or face being on the wrong side of history. For young people who have any proclivity to think the nature of marriage is rooted in sexual complementarity and generational renewal, the inevitable judgment of the ages can sting.

The phrase “the wrong side of history” is, of course, easily discreditable, as the intellectual exaltation and subsequent downfall of communism demonstrate. History is a relatively recent way of providing ourselves a narrative of the past, and this divinization of it—what Jonah Goldberg [calls](http://www.nationalreview.com/article/373856/empty-threat-future-judgment-jonah-goldberg) “Hallmark-card Hegelianism”—amounts, in effect, to the threat that “people won’t like you.” If you think same-sex marriage is an oxymoron and no-fault divorce should be reformed, then no New York cocktail parties for you.

Yet there is a deeper threat as well: not only will people not like you, but you will be socially excluded from prestigious jobs, awards, societies, or—[like Brendan Eich](http://dailysignal.com/2014/11/09/sexual-liberty-religious-liberty-can-coexist-heres/)—perhaps even the very company you helped create. This “arc of history” narrative is used to legitimize the vigilante justice wielded against the bigoted foes of progress. Because the future will inevitably turn toward “equality,” we are told, millennials who stand in the way have no future. They will be history. The majority of the Republican Party can be excused—they are from an older generation. But when you grow up in a time of progress, the revolution will not be merciful.

This is a real fear among my likeminded friends, and it is demoralizing. I want to propose a counter-narrative: assume for the rest of this article that the Supreme Court rules against conjugal civil marriage in the coming months. Assume the “inevitable” happens.

What next?

The fate of millennials who oppose same-sex marriage

In this future, there will be a new narrative: an opportunity for moral courage that will take its place within the grand tradition of those who stood strong against unjust and unwise revolutions.

In 1790, when Edmund Burke wrote his classic essay, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the reactions were not positive. He was not popular among the London elites, to say the least. As L.G. Mitchell [recounts](http://www.amazon.com/Reflections-Revolution-France-Oxford-Classics/dp/0199539022), “Burke was rejected right across the political spectrum.” Not only did radicals such as Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft “dislike the book,” but the members of his own Whig party disowned it: Charles James Fox considered the *Reflections* “to be in very bad taste” and the future Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger found only “rhapsodies in which there is much to admire and nothing to agree with.”

Yet Burke, the reform-minded statesman, decided to stand against the proclamations of the French Revolution. *Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity*—who would want to be against that? Burke, apparently. And he prophesied the coming Terror and the rise of Napoleon, because he refused to give in to the tyrannical dictates of eighteenth-century deified Reason.

Of course, the French Revolution and the current deconstruction of marriage are morally distinct. Yet the point remains: standing against self-anointed makers of progress is not the same as standing against the way of genuine social progress. In fact, it is sometimes just the opposite.

Moral courage to oppose the spirit of the age

Many movements will come and go, but the real moral crisis stands: as a result of the sexual revolution, the Western moral imagination has broken down to such an extent that it is considered inappropriate to articulate what marriage is. As Michael Hanby [writes](http://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/02/the-civic-project-of-american-christianity): “we live in revolutionary times, even if this revolution is the full flower of seeds planted long ago.” The quasi-Nietzschean transvaluation of values has led to the fact that what was once the collective wisdom of the ages concerning the human family, Hanby continues,

is now regarded by many as obsolete and even hopelessly bigoted, as court after court, demonstrating that this revolution has profoundly transformed even the meaning of reason itself, has declared that this bygone wisdom now fails even to pass the minimum legal threshold of rational cogency.

Those are strong words, but they capture the “spirit of the times.” I imagine Burke must have felt the same way: the collective wisdom of the past concerning our duties to the dead and the unborn was laid waste by the Jacobins in their haste to worship Reason deified and redefined. Our current situation is similar, though this revolution is more subtle and potent. The collapse of our marriage culture has been slow and its recession pernicious.

It took just one Anglo-Irish statesman to speak out and wake up Great Britain to the dangers of a revolution that, through its changes in the law, would erode the institutions of civil society. Likewise, it may only take a few from my generation to spark a moral revival. The current redefinitions of the very words we use, as Alice von Hildebrand [says](http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/alice-von-hildebrand-on-fleeting-fads-and-eternal-truth/), is “a severe moral crisis in which the eternal truths have been exchanged for temporary fads.” The real choice for those feeling demoralized is this: Which will you stand for?

The restoration of eternal truths of human nature requires more than speaking. This opportunity to witness to the human family for the good of all individuals requires virtue. Courage, Aristotle noted, makes all the other virtues possible. But physical courage is not enough. As von Hildebrand explains,

Physical courage—something you find on athletic fields, for example—is very common, but moral courage is not. It is not easy to stand up for what is right when that might mean losing one’s job, one’s family or even one’s life. It is far easier to keep quiet and let things slide.

Moral courage means placing more value upon the integrity of conscience over the stability of external events: being denied tenure, a plum internship, some job, friends who cannot tolerate “bigoted” opinions … prudence is necessary, yet those of my generation who stand for what the family is, what marriage is, and what the foundational institutions of civil society rooted in our rational and social natures are, make possible a new counter-revolution.

A **new moral restoration**

I’ve been arguing on the assumption that the Supreme Court rules against Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Anscombe, and Nietzsche. I mention the unexpected last one because, in his unpublished [notes](http://www.amazon.com/The-Will-Power-Friedrich-Nietzsche/dp/0394704371), Frederich Nietzsche cynically noted that a new “bourgeois” meaning of the word marriage had emerged, one that included good will and passion in contrast to the aristocratic sense of marriage as “the maintenance of the family.” In the new sense, marriage is “a question of society’s granting permission to two people to gratify their sexual desires with one another, under certain conditions … that keep the interests of society in view.” It becomes a contract between the present individuals and the state—much like marriage laws today.

Yet, in acknowledging this distinction, Nietzsche thereby implies a historical reality that was being forgotten. He would probably credit Christianity for this change, as it subtly overthrew the aristocratic assumptions of natural inequality—what he called “Master Morality.” The institution of marriage understood sacramentally and then later instituted civilly meant equality between the sexes. Indeed, as historian Larry Siedentop demonstrates in his recent book, [*Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674417533&content=toc), Christianity gave rise to the modern assumption of moral equality as a social status in Western Europe. But with the second transvaluation of moral systems in the ’60s and ’70s, the leftover bourgeois values after the recession of Christendom were not sufficient to retain the family as an irreducible category of thought and law.

But for those who stay, those who face the oncoming change, the chance to participate in a new transvaluation of values can take place: a moral restoration similar to the American religious revivals of the Great Awakenings. The bourgeois value system is on its last legs. We must face the reality that the breakdown of marriage culture hurts most those who are the least economically privileged. As sociologist Brad Wilcox [writes](http://www.aei.org/publication/just-economy-devastating-working-class-families/),

the retreat from marriage in working-class and poor communities across the United States hinders educational and economic opportunity, helps drive the crime rate higher in these communities, and exacts a serious social and emotional toll on children.

And as political scientists Robert Putnam in [*Our Kids*](http://www.amazon.com/Our-Kids-American-Dream-Crisis/dp/1476769893) (2015), and Charles Murray in [*Coming Apart*](http://www.amazon.com/Coming-Apart-State-America-1960-2010/dp/030745343X) (2012) both document, a new class and cultural divide exists in America between intact upper-class families and broken lower-class families. The effects Wilcox mentions are real and present dangers for our society—not to mention the immediate violation of a child’s right to be raised by her biological parents or [systematic attempts](http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/06/14488/~$e%20Courage%20to%20Be%20on%20the%20Wrong%20Side%20of%20History.docx) to subvert that right. An American moral and civic revival must be launched, and the marriage movement can help begin it.

The question facing my generation is, “Will you join it? Will you be on the side of truths or fads?”

Pockets of resistance

How such a civic revival would take place is difficult to predict—just as much as the long-term future of marriage laws in the United States. The reality of human freedom is such that the future lies in how we deliberate and act on our ideas and values.

But consider a previous case: no one predicted the fall of the Soviet Union would happen as fast as it did. And the academy in Western Europe and the United States were sympathetic to, if not outright supporters of, this totalitarian system. And when some, like the British philosopher Roger Scruton, tried in the ’70s and ’80s to help underground universities behind the Iron Curtain in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the only help they received was from the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity. Yet such efforts by a few lone individuals, when triumph seemed nonexistent and lasting change futile, helped aid the underground universities hiding in attics whose members would become the future leaders in rebuilding law and civil society in their home countries after the Soviet tyranny receded.

How many timid academics in their consciences regret that they did not have the moral courage to help those who needed it? Indeed, Scruton as a conservative activist sacrificed a career in academia for activities like that. “We, the supposed excluders, are therefore under pressure to hide what we are, for fear of being excluded.” Scruton writes in his latest [book](http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/freedom-s-partner_823371.html).

But, he continues, “I have resisted that pressure, and as a result my life has been far more interesting than I intended it to be.” Already pockets of resistance such as [Anscombe Societies](http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/12/the-new-college-counterculture" \o "Anscombe Societies) are sprouting up across college campuses. As [Judy Romea](http://dailysignal.com/2014/04/22/meet-stanford-senior-stood-marriage-pushed-back-intolerance/) once said to me: “Leading the Stanford Anscombe Society has been one of the most positive and rewarding experiences of my college career.” Being conjugal marriage hipsters and subversive to the new bourgeois tastes can have its unforeseen upsides.

Resisting the inevitable

It was not just communism that elevated history to be on its side. Fascism once seemed insurmountable. When FDR and Churchill met in 1941, as Daniel Hannan [recounts](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303289904579195922823363280), “Across the Eurasian landmass, freedom and democracy had retreated before authoritarianism, then thought to be the coming force.” But someone like the Catholic philosopher [Dietrich von Hildebrand](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/12/26/the-catholic-philosopher-who-took-on-hitler.html) chose to stand against this inevitable tide. Moving across Europe, to Brazil, and then to the United States, von Hildebrand showed that opportunities against the inevitable mean a time for moral courage to begin the good fight back.

The movement for marital restoration is beginning, and the chance for moral courage and a life daring to be countercultural is at hand. By continuing to speak up for religious freedom, the restoration of a marriage culture, and dignity of the family in the face of potential setbacks at the Supreme Court, we can become the Nietzscheans who hammer the libertine and atomistic idols of our age.

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