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# COMMENTATORS ON KEYNOTE ADDRESS

## ARE AFRICAN AMERICANS US?

RALPH RICHARD BANKS\*

Hanna Rosin's book, *The End of Men*, is a provocative and, at times, insightful examination of the changing economic positions of men and women.<sup>1</sup> A journalist by training, Rosin skillfully weaves individuals' stories into a broader exploration of social and economic transformation.

The core of the story is not that men are ending, of course, but that male dominance is. The economy is changing, Rosin observes, in ways that advantage women and disfavor men. Women have moved ahead educationally at the same time that advanced education has become worth more economically. As a result of technology and globalization, the income gap between, for instance, workers with post-graduate degrees versus those with only high school diplomas has grown considerably.<sup>2</sup> Among less-educated workers, too, shifts in the economy favor women. During the past few decades, the manufacturing jobs traditionally held by blue-collar men have become fewer and less lucrative, while the service jobs that women dominate are growing. Thus, women are doing better economically while men are doing worse, a repositioning that unsettles intimate relationships and patterns of parenting and family.

While the book includes many important observations and interesting stories, in this Essay I focus instead on what it excludes. In *The End of Men*, African Americans scarcely figure at all. They are cast as bit players at best, peripheral to the unfolding drama that Rosin seeks to chronicle. The absence of African Americans might seem unremarkable; after all, they are a numerical minority in American society. Yet, in fact, the omission of the African American experience is unfortunate because the pivotal development on which Rosin focuses – women gaining economic power and men losing it – is more apparent in the lives of African Americans than any other group.<sup>3</sup> If one wants to identify the potential implications for intimate relationships and family

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<sup>1</sup> HANNA ROSIN, *THE END OF MEN: AND THE RISE OF WOMEN* (2012).

<sup>2</sup> RALPH RICHARD BANKS, *IS MARRIAGE FOR WHITE PEOPLE? HOW THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MARRIAGE DECLINE AFFECTS EVERYONE* 39-45 (2011).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 2-4.

patterns of the continued economic repositioning of men and women, there is no better place to look than the lives of African Americans.

Throughout the book Rosin suggests that women have overtaken men economically. She highlights prominent women executives at Google and Facebook as though they are representative of a broader change.<sup>4</sup> She emphasizes that women are more likely to graduate high school and attend college than their male counterparts. She further touts a study of census data by a private marketing firm that purports to show that young, childless women in urban areas earn substantially more than their male counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

As intriguing as these bits of information are, they present a misleading picture. While Rosin is, of course, correct that women have progressed economically in recent decades, both relative to men and in an absolute sense, women have not eclipsed men economically to nearly the extent that Rosin suggests. Among whites, on whom Rosin focuses, the gender gap in education is small and in some cases actually favors men. As Rosin acknowledges, although high school girls are more proficient readers than boys are,<sup>6</sup> boys still outperform girls in math.<sup>7</sup> While greater numbers of women than men now graduate college, men still dominate the math and science fields (for example, computer science) that are most likely to lead to high-paying careers. So too are men still the majority at elite law, business, and medical schools.

Nor do the census data support the conclusion that women are outpacing men professionally. Rather, as sociologist Philip Cohen observes, women's supposed earnings advantage in the census study that Rosin cites simply reflects the fact that the urban areas studied contained large numbers of poorly educated and low-earning Latino men.<sup>8</sup> When college-educated white women workers are compared to their male counterparts, the women still earn less.<sup>9</sup>

White women's educational advancement hasn't translated into earnings parity with men in part because highly educated white women are less likely to work full time than either their less well-educated female counterparts or their male peers. White men who graduate from law or business school, for example, are likely to continue working full time for many years; not so with their white female peers. When highly educated white women become mothers, they are less likely than their high school-educated counterparts to continue to work full time. Those highly educated women, whose labor would be most valuable in the market, are also likely to have high-earning husbands,

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<sup>4</sup> ROSIN, *supra* note 1, at 229-30 ("Pretty soon women will take up 30 percent of spots at the top, which most people say is the tipping point, after which their presence there no longer seems unusual.").

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 107.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 161.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Philip N. Cohen, *The "End of Men" Is Not True: What Is Not and What Might Be on the Road Toward Gender Equality*, 93 B.U. L. REV. 1159, 1162 (2013).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

which allows them the freedom either to stay home with their children or to choose work that is more satisfying though less financially remunerative.

Among African Americans, the economic and educational repositioning of men and women is much more pronounced than among other groups, reflecting not only the success of women but the failures of men. Fully half of black boys fail to graduate high school.<sup>10</sup> More than one in ten black men in their twenties are incarcerated.<sup>11</sup> Estimates are that one in four black men will spend some time behind bars.<sup>12</sup> There are more than 1.5 times as many black women as men in college,<sup>13</sup> and by graduation that gap grows to nearly two to one.<sup>14</sup> Black women surpass black men even in high-paying, typically male fields such as computer science.<sup>15</sup> Black women substantially outnumber black men in both graduate and professional schools.<sup>16</sup> Each year, substantially more black women than black men become doctors or lawyers.<sup>17</sup> Due to their higher rates of labor force participation,<sup>18</sup> black women also translate their educational advantage into an earnings advantage to a greater extent than do any other group of women.<sup>19</sup>

While black women workers, in the aggregate, still earn less than black men, the male-female earnings gap is narrower among African Americans than any other racial group. The earnings of black women workers are ninety-five

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<sup>10</sup> SCHOTT FOUND. FOR PUB. EDUC., YES WE CAN: THE SCHOTT 50 STATE REPORT ON PUBLIC EDUCATION AND BLACK MALES (2010), available at <http://blackboysreport.org/bbr2010.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> *Racial Disparity*, SENTENCING PROJECT, <http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=122> (last visited May 23, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> ALLEN J. BECK & THOMAS P. BONCZAR, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, LIFETIME LIKELIHOOD OF GOING TO STATE OR FEDERAL PRISON (1997), available at <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/Llgsfp.pdf>. As of 2008 there were 846,000 black men in state or federal prisons and local jails in the United States. HEATHER C. WEST & WILLIAM J. SABOL, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, PRISON INMATES AT MIDYEAR 2008 – STATISTICAL TABLES 17 tbl.17 (2009), available at <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pim08st.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> See BANKS, *supra* note 2, at 38 (discussing statistics showing that “black women vastly outnumber black men in college,” such as the fact that while over 1.4 million black women are enrolled, fewer than 900,000 black men are).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 38-39 (“In postgraduate education black women outnumber black men more than two to one. In 2008 there were 125,000 African American women enrolled in graduate school, but only 58,000 African American men. The African American gender gap is also substantial in traditionally prestigious professions such as law and medicine.” (footnote omitted)).

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* (“According to data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics, black women received 751 medical degrees and 1,893 law degrees in 2008, while black men received only 396 medical degrees and 1,109 law degrees.”).

<sup>18</sup> BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE: A DATABOOK 13 (2013).

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 85.

percent of those of their male counterparts.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, when one takes into account the large numbers of black men who have dropped out of the labor market, one senses that black women have in fact surpassed black men economically. Indeed, black women already comprise sixty percent of managerial and professional workers among African Americans.<sup>21</sup>

With respect to the relative economic position of spouses, Rosin, again, correctly identifies the direction of change but overstates its magnitude.<sup>22</sup> She devotes an entire chapter to the "Seesaw Marriage,"<sup>23</sup> a reference to relationships in which the wife assumes the role of primary breadwinner in some years and the husband does so in others. While Rosin usefully points out that wives on average contribute a larger share of family income than in prior decades,<sup>24</sup> most marriages are not seesaw marriages. In the overwhelming majority of marriages, the husband earns more than the wife.<sup>25</sup>

The economic repositioning of spouses is, as with other changes, most extreme in the lives of African Americans. Black women have outpaced black men so substantially that a majority of college-educated black wives have a less-educated spouse.<sup>26</sup> In these marriages, the educational gap often translates into an economic gap. More than one in ten married, college-educated black women have a husband who is unemployed.<sup>27</sup> In many of these marriages, the wife's earnings will surpass those of her husband year after year for the simple reason that her skills are worth more in the market.

Just as these economic changes have been most extreme among African Americans, so too have been their reverberations in family patterns. African Americans have the lowest marriage rate,<sup>28</sup> highest divorce rate, and highest rate of unwed childbearing of any group in American society.<sup>29</sup> Each of these

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<sup>20</sup> BANKS, *supra* note 2, at 42 (indicating further that the current ninety-five percent figure represents an increase from just thirty years ago when black women earned only seventy-five percent of the black men's incomes).

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> She states, for example, that "the average American wife contributes 42.2 percent" of her family's income. See ROSIN, *supra* note 1, at 48. For additional information on the evolution of the wife's economic contribution to the household, see, for example, PAUL TAYLOR ET AL., PEW RESEARCH CTR., WOMEN, MEN AND THE NEW ECONOMICS OF MARRIAGE 16-17 (2010).

<sup>23</sup> ROSIN, *supra* note 1, at 47-77.

<sup>24</sup> TAYLOR ET AL., *supra* note 22, at 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>26</sup> BANKS, *supra* note 2, at 84.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 85.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 5-16.

<sup>29</sup> Another trend that is apparent among whites but even more so among African Americans relates to when people marry. Throughout American society the age of first marriage has risen during the past half century. TAYLOR ET AL., *supra* note 22, at 19. This is one component of the marriage decline. More people are unmarried, in part because people are delaying marriage. That has happened the most among African Americans. *Id.* In 1950

sobering statistics stems largely from the disadvantage of black men. The decline in African American marriages does not reflect a distinctive black culture so much as the pervasive struggles of black men,<sup>30</sup> reflected in low employment rates, high incarceration rates, and educational failure. The economic prospects of many black men are now so poor, and their lives so unstable, that they are not appealing partners in the eyes of women.

The decline in marriage translates into increases in unwed childbearing. Even as a woman decides to have a child, she may not see the reason to marry a man who is himself unstable and who has little to offer economically. Thus, seventy percent of black children are born to parents who are not married.<sup>31</sup> As a result, black children are more likely than any other group of children in American society, by a wide margin, to be raised by only one of their parents, typically the mother.<sup>32</sup> Research confirms what common sense suggests: that children benefit from the investment – emotional, financial, and social – of both their parents, and that investment is most likely to occur when the parents live together in a stable, intimate relationship.<sup>33</sup>

For whites, the marriage decline is now largely concentrated among the poor, but for African Americans, the pool of black men is so depleted that even college-educated black women have become less likely to marry. College-educated black women “are twice as likely as their white counterparts to be unmarried.”<sup>34</sup> The gender imbalance may, paradoxically, even lower the marriage rates of those black men who are stable and affluent, the very qualities that women tend to seek.<sup>35</sup> Because such black men are in short supply, are very sought after, and confront such a wide array of relationship options, they may become less inclined to marry.<sup>36</sup>

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African Americans married earlier than other groups. The average age for African Americans was younger, now it is older. African Americans marry, on average, at a later age than any other group. *See generally* ANDREW CHERLIN, MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE (rev. ed. 1992) (describing changes in the institution of marriage in America since World War II and focusing on the distinctions between family patterns of white and black Americans).

<sup>30</sup> BANKS, *supra* note 2, at 46-47 (describing the difficulties confronting black men that diminish their appeal as potential marriage partners).

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 68.

<sup>32</sup> Approximately seven in ten black children are born to unmarried parents, a rate that is higher than for any other group. Black children are also especially likely to endure the dissolution of their parents’ relationship. Kris Marsh et al., *The Emerging Black Middle Class: Single and Living Alone*, 86 SOC. FORCES 735 (2007); Averil Y. Clarke, *The Sexless Lives of College-Educated Black Women: When Education Means No Man, Marriage, or Baby* app. 3, at 406-08 (2003) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania).

<sup>33</sup> BANKS, *supra* note 2, at 114.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>35</sup> At every income level, black men are less likely than their white counterparts to marry. *Id.* at 47.

<sup>36</sup> The key to understanding this phenomenon is to conceive of relationships as

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This situation reshapes childbearing even for college-educated black women. While for whites the incidence of unwed childbearing is concentrated among the economically disadvantaged, for blacks it now spans the socioeconomic spectrum. College-educated black women are much more likely than their white peers to have a child without being married.<sup>37</sup> Many other black women either adopt or remain childless.

Those African American couples that do marry are more likely than not to divorce. I suspect that part of the reason is the sort of educational and economic gulf that is most common among African American spouses.<sup>38</sup> The sort of compatibility on which a successful marriage depends may be lacking when the spouses occupy different educational and socioeconomic categories. Spouses in a white collar-blue collar marriage may experience a sort of cultural conflict, as they have different ideas about how to structure their relationship and lives. Another source of difficulty is that when the wife earns the bulk of the income, the husband may feel economically dependent. Many men expect, rightly or wrongly, to be the primary breadwinner, and their wives may want them to be as well. Even wives who fully embrace working for pay and who earn substantially more than their husbands are unlikely to have been raised with the expectation that their role may include supporting their spouse. These wives likely see working as a freedom they enjoy, but not an obligation they must fulfill. They may work so that they never become dependent on a man, but not in order to support one.

If the educational and economic fortunes of men and women of other races diverge as dramatically as they have for African Americans, then they may follow suit in terms of marriage, divorce, and childbearing as well. To some extent, the African American present may be the future that awaits us all.

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negotiations that occur within a market. As in any market, the outcomes of individual negotiations depend on the power that each participant can bring to bear, which stems, in turn, from the composition of the market as a whole. If there are more women than men in the relationship market, then men wield more power in their negotiations with women. Conversely, if there are more men, then women are better able to get what they want from the negotiation. Whichever group is in short supply will have more power in the negotiation because they will have more options outside of that particular relationship.

The men who hold the most power are well-educated, affluent black men. These highly sought-after men are not only less likely to marry than their white counterparts, but also they are less likely to marry than lower-earning yet economically stable black men. One explanation for this curious finding is that affluent black men have sufficient market power to maintain intimate relationships without offering the commitment of marriage, which assumes of course that men are somewhat less inclined than women to marry. *See id.* at 49-67.

<sup>37</sup> *See id.* at 68-82 (challenging the conventional notion that black, unwed mothers are most often poor and uneducated by discussing how middle-class black women, who often are college educated, are similarly more likely to be unwed mothers compared to their white counterparts).

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 8.

According centrality to the black experience would have yielded another benefit as well. Examining the American experience through the lens, or prism, of the black experience would have countered a lamentable and long-standing tendency to cast African Americans as deficient or deviant. In fact, the black experience, for all its distinctiveness, is also a representative American experience, a particular story that is at once universal. Recognizing that fact benefits us all.