

Book Review: The Meaning of Matrimony: Debating Same Sex Marriage

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The Meaning of Matrimony attempts to capture the key arguments for and against marriage for gay couples in England and Wales. The contributors consider whether the Government's legislation for same-sex marriage is liberal or illiberal; whether marriage should embody 'tradition' or social change; who speaks for the support and opposition of same-sex marriage; and importantly, the function marriage performs in society. **Sneha Knrishnan** feels that a more diverse selection of voices should have been included, and that issues intricately connected to the debate on gay marriage – such as immigration and social welfare – should not have been sidelined.

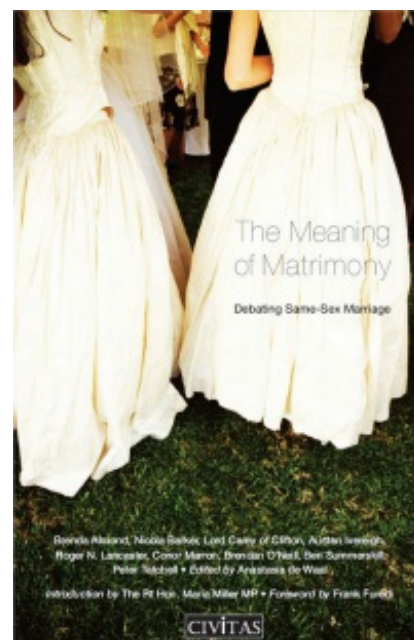


The Meaning of Matrimony: Debating Same Sex Marriage. Anastasia de Waal (ed). CIVITAS Publications. June 2013.

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This [Civitas](#) collection on the contentious issue of same sex marriage is a much-needed and topical primer on this issue. Recent legal changes in the US as well as in the UK permitting same sex couples to marry have precipitated a polarising debate that seemed to tease and draw into public light some big legal and moral tensions in both nations. [Anastasia de Waal](#) does a commendable job of bringing some of the chief threads of the public discussion on this subject in Britain in to conversation with each other.

This sense of dialogue is reflected in the way that the chapters are organised. The author balances essays that express scepticism of the growing support for same sex marriage from both within and outside government circles in the UK with the views of members of the British LGBTQ community. However, the choice of contributors is puzzling, even if perhaps indicative of hierarchies within the queer community on the one hand, and of the continuing ways in which the problems of particular sexual minorities are made invisible on the other. The book includes essays by peers, and members of the Anglican and Catholic churches, Conservative party members, gay men – among them, activists like [Peter Tatchell](#) – and all of two women, among whom one is a well-known conservative defender of the traditional family. No transgendered or transsexual contributor is included in the collection, nor indeed an essay that explicitly introduces intersections of race, class and ethnicity, which have been central in this debate. This is an especially gaping hole given the great public controversy over the clause mandating spousal consent to gender transition in the recent Marriage (same-sex couples) Act.



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In the introduction to the volume, the Rt. Hon. Maria Miller, Conservative MP and a minister in the present cabinet writes that marriage continues to be vital to society because “the principles of love, loyalty and commitment, which are at its heart are vital components of a strong society” (ix). She goes on then to repeat the current government’s line on the matter, suggesting that legalising gay marriage would not be a radical departure from a conservative ideology on marriage and family, but only go towards strengthening this institution. The insidious content of this statement has of course become evident to us in the austerity measures that have penalised single mother families and other kinds of units that are not based on marriage. We might do well, in this climate then, to recall that governments that seek to encourage marriage and cut public funds at the same time are washing their hands of social responsibility, while devolving this onto very traditionally constituted (i.e. monogamous couple plus child) families, excluding single people living with friends, single parents, intergenerational combinations of households and so on. In this context, it is disturbing to observe that this book appears to proceed, uncritically, on the premise that marriage is a desirable institution. Indeed what struck me as I took note of this seemingly narrowly constituted cohort of contributions is that this book appears to examine matrimony in a vacuum, pushing to the side-lines key issues like immigration, taxation, inheritance and social welfare all of which are intricately connected to the debate on gay marriage and are perhaps what animate it. We might remember here that the [Edie Windsor case in the US Supreme Court](#), which resulted in the reading down of the Defence of Marriage act was in fact, a contestation of the levy of inheritance tax on a same-sex spouse, after the death of her partner.

Given this general tone, Nicola Barker’s feminist critique of marriage is a refreshing and welcome addition to the collection. It appears towards the middle of the collection, affording a moment’s critical distance, after the reader has had the chance to learn the basics of the debate. There have been many who, like Barker, have advanced such critiques of the movement for same-sex marriage, including, in America, Lisa Duggan, both in her scholarly work and her tongue-in-cheek radical blog [The Bully Bloggers](#). In an issue of the Scholar and Feminist, Terry Boggis provides [a long list](#) of the many kinds of families which are not covered by gay marriage, and in which many hundreds live. The editor of this volume may have benefited from including the perspectives of some members of the queer community who are on these margins – whose families marriage does not begin to describe or contain.

That said, essays by members of the clergy, which make clear a nuanced theological position, are particularly pertinent at this time, given the not-always-unified reactions of the Anglican Church to legislation on same sex marriage. Indeed, this book’s great success appears to be in addressing this debate in its blurry areas between the dichotomies that place gay-friendly and homophobic analogues to pro and anti same sex marriage.

As a queer-identified reader of this book, it occurred to me halfway into the volume that the intended reader of these essays is a middle-class heterosexual person with no pressing political opinions on this matter – the average Briton who is wondering what all the fuss is about. To this reader, the book does full justice – presenting a wide range of arguments, in a very readable register. For the reader who might perhaps be part of the lesbian couple who have chosen to have a child with a male friend and seek recognition for her family of three parents and one child, or say, for the working-class queer refugee facing extradition and wondering what gay marriage does for his rights, this book has less to offer.

Sneha Krishnan is a doctoral student reading International Development at Wolfson College, Oxford. Her current research examines practices of pleasure and the constitution of urban subjectivities among college-going women in South India. She is also interested more broadly in interrogating themes of youth spaces, class, gender and sexuality in Urban India. Sneha has a previous graduate degree in Area Studies also from Oxford and was at Stella Maris College in Chennai, India for her BA in History. Her previous research has interrogated narratives of masculinity in post-colonial nationalism and sexual citizenship. [Read more reviews by Sneha.](#)