

The Organized Freedom of Love: An Interview with Eva Illouz

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‘The grand ambition of this book is thus to have done to emotions [...] what Marx did to commodities: to show that they are shaped by social relations; that they do not circulate in a free and unconstrained way; that their magic is social; and that they contain and condense the institutions of modernity’ (Illouz, 2012: 241). With her most recent work, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, Eva Illouz penetrates to the heart of the subject to reveal the extent to which love is today the experience of an unprecedented social shaping. In response to those economists who project rational choice as the paradigm of all anthropology, the heart of the subject’s freedom and the fundament of free exchange, she objects that the centrality of choice in the love experience is anything but liberating and represents the place where domination in love relationships manifests itself most thoroughly in the modern world. The book, first published in Germany in 2011, has provoked a vast debate across the world.

BC/EC: By describing the specific pain and suffering brought about by and through the love relationships of our era, you do not limit yourself simply to sketching a contemporary phenomenology of love: you denounce both the economic and the political power that is at the source of emotional pain and the various kinds of emotional domination (notably by men over women). You thus link back into a tradition that one could call ‘critical thought’. How would you define the nature of critique? And why does the critical function proceed today via sociology?

Eva Illouz: Walter Benjamin defined very well the departure point for critical thought. He wrote somewhere that ‘the separation of the true from the false is the endpoint of the materialist method and not its point of departure. That means in other words that it takes its departure from the object produced by error, the *doxa*.¹ Critical thought tries to separate the true from the false. But not simply that. It is above all a form of thought which reflects on the gap between what is and what should be, and which understands also how what exists allows the imagination of what should be. Critical thought is thus from the start a normative thought, but it must also be able to integrate a reflection upon itself, upon those very conditions in which the gap between what is and what should be is thinkable and made possible.

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Now it seems to me that normative thought, such as it is practised by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, is no longer possible for various reasons. Firstly, the process of critique has become an everyday scheme of thought. Everybody is suspected not to know what his real interests are or the unconscious reasons for his actions: hence, everyone has become a minor critical philosopher. Then, since each actor in the world has access to what seems to him or her to be their own self-knowledge, it is more difficult to come down from the heights of Olympus to deliver to them the truth of what they are or are not. Finally, if critical thought has tools which allow it to work in the domains of aesthetics or politics, it does not have any for the domain of the emotions. That is why I would say that I am trying to formulate a critical thought that is not normative, or only very slightly so. It is a little like what Foucault had tried to do. His method consisted of juxtaposing different frames of reference, to be able to make stand out that which in our truth regimes is arbitrary. But, in the process, this thought bites its own tail, because you can no longer see what you can say and in the name of what.

My – postnormative – critique does not hide its hand. It is openly anti-capitalist, but it is neither that of the ‘philosopher on the mountain-top’, to pick up Michael Walzer’s expression, nor purely ‘internalist’ – such that it would limit itself to relaying the points of view of the actors. I would rather say that I am trying to create critical effects by reascending the chain of causes of subjectivity. Spinoza has never been as relevant as he is today.

In your phenomenology of modern love, the choice of partner becomes the central moment of the love experience. One of your theses consists in affirming that love coincides today with the choosing, which precedes it and confirms it at every moment. Where did this centrality of the choice arise from?

There has been some research in which attempts have been made to elucidate something which immediately preoccupies us: and some other research where an issue comes back under different guises and that we take a while to understand. For me, the issue of the choice belongs to the second category. In fact, I have been cogitating about this for a long time without realizing it. When I thought about the difference between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, I considered it in terms of ‘content’, of representations, of meanings: sexual freedom, freedom to choose, romantic love and so on. Various objects of signification that seemed to me to explain the difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’. But by reading Jane Austen and trying to understand what holds her novels’ plots together, I realized that I was on the wrong path and that it was the category of the choosing itself, its structure and its articulation, which had changed.

That appreciation marked an important stage in my work. Up until then, without even realizing it, I had been influenced by psychology or economics, which both think in terms of decision making – whence questions about rationality (or the lack thereof). The key moment was thus the one when I came to the understanding that choice was a sociological structure, and not a property of the act of choosing itself. So, if you like, it was my own way of extracting the question of choice from the hands of the economists.

Next I would say that through choice, you can very clearly pose the question of the moral stakes of modern society. I recall having read a reference to Italo Calvino in Renata Salecl’s book *The Tyranny of Choice* (2011). It was about a character named Palomar who goes to buy cheese, and when he gets to the cheese shop he is confronted with an enormous range of choice (Calvino, 2004). In particular he is faced with the following dilemma: either taste all the cheeses one by one (by the sampling method, as we say), or else try to find the right single choice, to find ‘the’ cheese which will be better than all the others. If you replace ‘cheese’ by ‘sexual partners’ or ‘lovers’, you will have a fairly accurate picture of the modern sexual and sentimental condition. That is what interests me in choice.

We could say then, according to you, that that close link, that identification almost, between love and choice, between love and choosing, is something specifically modern. So is it this choice which could be the primary source of modern love hurt?

In Michel Houellebecq's book *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the narrator offers this commentary which sums up things very well: 'If human relationships are becoming progressively impossible, it is of course due to that multiplication of the degrees of liberty of which Jean-Yves Fréhaut made himself the enthusiastic prophet. I am absolutely certain that he himself had never known any liaison: his state of freedom was extreme' (1997: 43). The effect of sexual freedom is to change what I call the ecology of choice, to multiply considerably the *samples* of the love choice. The ecology of a choice consists of the objective constraints which make us choose one object rather than another. The ecology of choice answers the question: 'What, in the spatial and sociological structure of my environment, impels me to make certain choices and not others?' When the constraints and taboos on the choice of a partner are lifted, there are suddenly a great number of choices. With psychology lending a hand, the love encounter is going to be experienced more and more as a choice. The subject must identify the person who suits him or her from a large number of possible choices, and he or she must understand the reasons for that choice, must justify them and legitimize them by having recourse to a psychological awareness.

But attention: the transformation of the notion of choice does not mean that the norm of emancipation or freedom is at work. The historian Edward Shorter, for example, has put forward the idea – since picked up by others – that capitalism freed social actors from the yoke of parental authority, allowing them thus to choose marriage partners according to their feelings (1975, 1976). Henceforth discharged from the economic and social constraints that the pre-modern economy represented, which forced them to submit to parental authority in order to assure their inheritance, or else which obliged them to choose a spouse from the same social class, modern men and women can henceforth find love 'freely'. From this perspective, choosing a partner is seen as the right to choose, as a liberation from these economic and social strictures. Choice becomes here an expression of the glorious march of freedom. It appears as an irresistible force, sweeping from its path any economic and social imperative. But the perspective that I offer is different: if for the philosopher, freedom is a moral value, for the sociologist it is an organized and institutionalized practice. As Foucault has very well shown, in passing from a traditional society to a modern one, there is no passage from constraint to freedom, but rather a reorganization of the relationship between constraint and freedom. Freedom is a social device, organized in institutions, in rules and in laws.

Already in your earlier books (Illouz, 1997, 2006), you have emphasized the constituent role of love in the formation and self-definition of the modern subject. Why does the modern self need love, and need to engage in love, to self-constitute?

Modern subjects live their lives purely in the feeling of their singularity, a singularity on which they patiently work, both on the mental level as well as the physical, with the shaping of the body which accompanies the consumer culture. But this singularity often has no 'witness'. The modern subject is thus in search of witnesses. The love other is someone who will be able to bear witness to our singularity. That other will acknowledge it and in a certain sense will serve as a relay between us and the society (he or she will reconfirm our value, and will give a meaning along with us to the relation which we have with the world). Thus the other player in the love partnership fulfils a central sociological function: he or she allows individualist practices to be stabilized, for them to be given a dual form, to make individualism a social form that is two-fold and for two.

I might add a second reason, which is not very far removed from that one. The process of social recognition – which was moulded in some sense in the very structure of the pre-modern social

fabric – depends henceforth on the goodwill of the social agents. Recognition is not a given; it is not inscribed in a statute, it has to be negotiated, merited, won. It is in love that these processes that strive after recognition and that are in principle open ones seek to find a solid grounding. It is the other of the love relationship who will provide this recognition in abundance. At the same time, the struggle for recognition does not end at the heart of the love relationship, but on the contrary is prolonged there.

Why Love Hurts *begins with an exemplary analysis of the novels of Jane Austen. In a new book you have just delivered a fascinating interpretation of 50 Shades of Grey* (Illouz, 2013). *What is the role of literature in your work?*

In a lecture that he gave at the Collège de France in 1978, Roland Barthes stated in effect that the analysis of the ‘pathos’ of literature remained to be undertaken. He understood by that expression the analysis of the emotions aroused by literature. I am extremely anti-formalist in my approach to literature (and Barthes was cocking an astounding snook at the formalists in that lecture). What interests me is the way in which the emotions are articulated.

Foucault’s method consists of juxtaposing regimes of truth to subsequently show up their arbitrary character. For my part, I attempt to juxtapose regimes of identity, systems where the self has different relations to itself. It is for this that I find literature serviceable: for understanding how we can direct a different look upon our self. It allows me to make common sense external, by a classical procedure of sociologists and sociology. But contrary to the latter field and its practitioners, what interests me are the practices of introspection, the relationship of self to self, the whole dense fabric of moral utterance, of cultural presuppositions which demarcate the geography of the sentiments, that is, their intensity (compare the intensity of the Romantics with the cool and detached style of a Flaubert and of our literature), their mode of expression (think of the role of tears in the expression of masculinity in the eighteenth century), their role in social interactions (think for example of the disappearance of the notion of honour and of the duel) and their performativity (when does making a declaration of a feeling have an effect on the world). Jon Elster – the great philosopher of rationality – has written that literature is a privileged terrain for the study of the emotions, of the non-primary emotions, those which are nourished by language and narrative structures. He is completely right in this. But you have to add that that would not be possible unless you understand the emotional life as a manifestation of the moral life, that which you, Barbara, call ethopoeia.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Note

1. ‘Die Scheidung des Wahren vom Falschen ist für die materialistische Methode nicht der Ausgangspunkt sondern das Ziel. Das heißt mit andern Worten, daß sie bei dem vom Irrtum, von der *doxa* durchsetzten Gegenstand ihren Ansatz nimmt’ (Benjamin, 1974: 1160).

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