

## **All You (Still) Need Is Love? Love, Pain, and Capitalism in Contemporary Culture**

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**Abstract:**

Eva Illouz's *Why Love Hurts* is the latest contribution to the ongoing attempt in Sociology, Cultural and Gender Studies to come to terms with modern forms of romantic love and emotional subjectivities in times of global capitalism and shifting gender relations. This book does “to love what Marx did to commodities”, that is, to show how love is “shaped and produced by concrete social relations” and “circulates in a marketplace of unequal competing actors” (p. 6). Illouz sketches how the social organization of love and pain have changed throughout modernity and have become subject to economic as well as gendered power dynamics in unprecedented ways. By outlining how the modern romantic self is caught in the attempt to reconcile competing discourses of egalitarianism, feminism, and individualism with the desire to love and be loved, this book ultimately argues that love has become one of the most important and most painful sites for the constitution of modern subjectivities.

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Eva Illouz is a professor of sociology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem whose works not only have had widespread impact in academia but have found their way, internationally, into the mainstream press (see e.g. Spiegel Online, 11.10.2011). After *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* (1997) and *Cold Intimacies* (2007), *Why Love Hurts* is her latest pursuit to disentangle the complex and complicated relationship between the conditions of modernity, capitalism, and love. Her central argument is that the conditions of modernity have produced love as first and foremost means through which the self is valued and validated, both internally and externally. As 'objective' parameters for mate selection (such as class and race) have supposedly vanished, one's success in the "sexual fields" and the "marriage market" (p. 18) has become a direct reflection of one's (self-)worth and lovability: "when the self becomes essentialized, when love is defined as addressing the innermost essence of the person,[...] a rejection becomes a rejection of the self"(p. 34). And in the face of the uncertainty and fragility inherent to modern relationships, fear, ambiguity, disappointment, and pain have become the dominant cultural patterns that structure our romantic experiences.

This development, as Illouz proposes, has been enabled by one of "the most powerful cultural and institutional vectors shaping modern selfhood": choice (p. 27). Via a comparison of courtship in Victorian literature, she traces how through transformations in the "ecology and architecture of choice" (p. 27, italics in original) capitalist values of efficiency, rationality, and competition have come to enter the emotional lives of modern subjectivities. These transformations are characterized by three main factors: the deregulation of the ways in which partners are selected, namely from external, meta-social criteria towards an individualization of choice; the tendency to evaluate (potential) partners simultaneously in psychological as well as in sexual terms; and the emergence of "sexual fields", in which attractiveness and 'sexiness' have become a form of capital that can be traded in the marriage market.

However, as men still have the possibility to construct themselves as recognized subjects outside the discourses of love, it is therefore women who are particularly disadvantaged by the individualization and economization of love. The economy of romantic choice works – analogous to labour markets – according to "the laws of supply and demand, scarcity, and oversupply" (p. 58). And because men enjoy "the structural advantage of withholding their emotions"

(p. 103), which is culturally framed as "commitment phobia", it is they, she points out in chapter three, who "control the terms in the sexual bargain" (p. 78). As women pursue mainly "exclusivist" strategies (p. 74), intimacy and commitment become a form of (male) power or capital to be traded, which results in a situation of "emotional inequality" (p. 103) and the "emotional domination" (p. 104) of women.

This emotional inequality is critical, as Illouz points out in chapter four, as the romantic bond has become essential in constituting our sense of (self-)worth. Faced with new forms of ontological insecurity and uncertainty, the modern self suffers in its struggle to conciliate the wish for autonomy with the desire for recognition. Emphasizing again the gendered dimensions of these processes, Illouz contends that "romantic suffering is unequally distributed" (p. 155). She points here to the role of therapy culture, which postulates that the failure to perform in the marriage market can only be overcome by means of self-inspection, self-monitoring, and self-work. All of them are promulgated as cultural techniques specifically for women.

In chapter five she outlines how the rationalization of love can be seen as connected to certain developments in the areas of science (biology), technology (internet), and politics (feminism). She argues that where biology has demystified love by reducing it to a chemical reaction, feminism has rationalized love as a political institution that is intrinsically shaped by patriarchal power structures. These processes, along with the new ways of choosing, evaluating, and seeking a partner made possible by the internet, have led to a decline in eroticism. Now, cynicism, irony, and rationality stand alongside, and in contradictory relationship to, the cultural trope of love as unexplainable, magical force. Lastly, she points to the role of mass culture in manufacturing pre-mediated constructions of love that "generate desire, longing, and anticipatory emotions, emotions about emotions to come, and cognitive scripts about how they should feel and be enacted"(p. 206). What she calls "fictional emotions" (p. 210) play a key role in the socialization of modern subjectivities as they perpetuate the idea of love as the most desired state of being and ultimate goal of existence.

## Conclusion

Illouz's book provides a careful and sophisticated reading of the intricacies of love and capitalism. Drawing on a vast number and variety of sources, from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and self-help literature to websites, interviews, *The New York Times*, Victorian literature, and popular culture such as *Sex and the City*, she charts the complexities of how modernity produces the self as an emotional project. However, the eclecticism of her samples and the lack of contextualization with regard to her methodology make her argument somewhat fragile and sometimes hard to follow. Her interviewees for example are from the US and Israel but are presented as exemplars of "the" Western discourse of love. Beside the insufficient differentiation within Western discourses of emotions, the lack of critical engagement with other national and cultural discourses of love is unfortunate as it would have strengthened her otherwise well elaborated argument. Furthermore, Illouz evades a discussion of how emotional discourses might be specific to social class as well as race and age.

And while it can be regarded as a key characteristic of modernity that capitalism increasingly gets hold of non-heteronormative forms of love and romance, these issues are not even touched upon. And although Illouz draws on a wide variety of Western philosophical and theoretical accounts, her analysis of love as modern institution begs for a Foucauldian reading, which she managed to evade entirely.

However, in contrast to her earlier works, this time Illouz puts much more emphasis on the gendered dynamics of love and romance. This advances her argument significantly and makes the book a valuable and much needed contribution to the Western discussion of how emotions and capitalism influence each other.