

Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto

**Paul Johnson, "Love, Heterosexuality and Society".
London: Routledge, 2005**

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Recensioni

Paul Johnson, *Love, Heterosexuality and Society*. London: Routledge, 2005, 153 pp.

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The book presents an empirical study about “the ways in which intimate loving is related to the practices of doing heterosexuality” [p. 1]. The author embraces a sociocultural approach by analysing both the cultural discourses of romantic love and of (hetero)sexuality. The research doesn’t focus on what love *is*, but on what love *does*, as it produces a particular form (beliefs and practices) of sexuality that is naturalised and taken for granted. This entails a reversal of the interpretative framework from a biological (“to read forward”, which is the idea that love is considered as the biological basis of heterosexuality) to a sociocultural perspective (“to read backwards”, which is that love is considered as a cultural legitimization of heterosexuality).

As many social scientists have pointed out, the second half of the Twentieth century witnessed a deep and wide transformation of sexual identities and practices. As a reaction to this sociocultural change, sociology witnessed a shift from the concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” to a postmodern idea of flexible and plural sexualities. Johnson criticises this turn around by stating that, despite of changes in the theoretical representation, heterosexuality has maintained its mainstream position, being defined as the norm(al), straight, natural and original. As a result, “to analyse heterosexuality is to study one of the most fundamental axioms of our contemporary social organisation” [p. 5], a very difficult empirical task to undertake because, unlike studying homosexuality where sexual identities tend to be more visible and conscious, “heterosexuality is a largely silent principle of social organisation” [p. 5]. Studying heterosexuality therefore requires investigating some expressions of heterosexual practice and identity in order to make it visible. The author chooses to focus on love for two reasons: because the desire for love is often translated into heterosexual arrangements, and because love is considered natural, essential and compelling.

In the introduction, the author discusses some of the most influential positions in the social theory on heterosexuality (Rich, De Beauvoir, Wittig, Sedgwick, Katz, Butler, Jacksons, Plummer, Holland, Skeggs, just to quote some) and on love (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, Giddens, Langford, Luhmann, Illouz, Weeks, Bell and Binnie, Jackson, Ingraham). As a result, he argues that theoretical research on heterosexuality is far more developed than empirical investigation, whereas on love and intimacy there is more empirical study not referring to heterosexuality. Both these situations are unsatisfying, because “to say ‘love’ is just a shorthand which hides the heteronormativity it reproduces” [p. 14].

The author has carried out qualitative research on a sample of 24 men and women: by analysing the

empirical accounts of these social actors, he focuses on how cultural discourses shape individuals, but also how individuals understand and deploy discourses. Moreover, assuming a performative approach, he studies how normative conventions are continuously re-enacted.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the “language of love” used by people to define and account for their experience. A first feature is paradoxically the lack of a clear way to describe what love is. People give a wide range of answers, showing the difficulty in rendering the experience of love into words. Interviewees often rely on biological or psychological explanations to describe love as the result of innate drives to reproduce. Another shared belief about love is its uniqueness, that is the conviction that everyone experiences it in a different way: this uniqueness stems from its link to an embodied experience (eg. chemistry, spark, click, butterflies in your stomach, a tingle inside, becoming light on your feet). Moreover, love is often described as something out of control, as a force outside our will: people stress that love is a natural force that “arrives,” “happens,” or into which one “falls.”

The author points out how these beliefs are socially constructed by cultural discourses: according to a performative understanding of language, the way we speak of love is constitutive of how we feel about it. People have an “emotional dictionary” [see, for example, the work of Hochschild] that explains what an embodied sensation means and under what circumstances it might arise. As the author states: “Emotions are outside the body because they are rendered legitimate and recognizable in language (...) But the crucial point is that the outside construction of love becomes incorporated and inscribed to form an inside, a bodily corporeality which becomes an interiority of the sociality in which it is situated” [p. 31]. This socially constructed corporeality then is considered as a natural – but not completely understandable – depth and truth: “The body is a nodal point in operationalizing an essentialization of love because love is reduced to an indescribable set of bodily sensations” [p. 32].

Discourses about love emphasise the mysterious, the biological, and the powerful, but this force is limited by the type of sexual practices and relationships it produces: beneath these discourses lay underwritten naturalised conceptions of sexuality, resulting in a normative understanding of the link between (hetero)sex and love that tends to be considered as trans-historical and universal, while the organisation of relationships and intimate practices are open to historical change.

In chapter 2 the author focuses on “the ways in which love provides a framework through which heterosexual sex is negotiated in the empirical practice of social actors” [p. 49]. Sex and love are distinct discourses used in tandem, and they overlap in the modern concept of “intimacy.” As he states: “Love has a normative force in regulating, authorizing and proscribing types of heterosexual sexual practices and, whilst the linear heterosexual script of falling in love/getting married/ consummating a sexual relationship is not prominent in practice, I want to argue that normative ideals about love still exert considerable force over sex” (p.49).

Interviewees still tend to consider sex as an expression of love, as evidenced by many examples: sex outside love is considered worthless; “sexual love” is distinguished from “loveless lust” which is viewed as a mere physical urge; even if sex is no longer legitimated by marriage, people still believe that, in intimacy, sex should follow love. “This sexualization of love is a specific characteristic of our modern relations of intimacy, where sex becomes the primary vehicle through which love is consolidated” [p. 54]. Men and women differ in the way they justify the distinction between sex and love. Women tend to refer to particular forms of legitimate heterosexual expressions: a respectable

woman doesn't necessarily avoid sex, but she is expected to join it to love and to a committed relationship; casual sex is described as enjoyable, but also at risk (of shame, guilt, disgust); sex should be special, bonding, and spiritual. Men, on the contrary, tend to consider sexuality as a natural set of desires that are blocked by romantic scripts, so that they "must sublimate initial sexual desire under the rubric of sexual convention" [p. 67]. In male accounts, sex is described as a source of pleasure and release, not necessarily linked to intimacy and commitment.

In chapter 3, the author points out how romantic ideals are deeply embedded in our subjectivities, even when we are critical of them. "Love, as Foucault (...) would have termed it, is a technology of the self that offers us a way to work on our subjectivities and to affect certain ways of feeling about ourselves (...) The work of subjectivity, in which active social agents engage, is reliant on pre-existing gendered norms which become manifest, in the subject positions of masculine and feminine, through the appropriation of heteronormative forms of love" [p. 79].

Cultural discourses of love seem to affect very differently female and male subjectivities. For women, love produces not only emotions like joy and pleasure, but also self-esteem and confidence. Not being in love produces disappointment not only with this unsatisfactory aspect of the relationship, but with a more general sense of personal failure too. Women's accounts position themselves in the middle between a negative (love as an ideological trap to make women accept unequal relationship) and a positive view of love (love as a path to freedom, empowerment, self-discovery and self-transformation). Relying on Holloway's "have/hold discourse," the author acknowledges how female subjectivity is constituted through the definition of a lack that can be filled by heterosexual relationships. Love gives a sense of fulfilment, the completion of something that is missing. Women interviewed often use the language of "becoming whole" or the "lock and key" metaphor: but the sense of lack is not a pre-existing state, it's produced by the construction of romantic love. Loss of love then implies losing the self, a diminished sense of self.

Men's accounts show a strong resistance to the notion of self-change, because their gender definition is that of being complete, not lacking. Therefore men come to love with a dual purpose: to ratify their power position and marking the distinction from those who don't have it. Men don't focus on self-change: love introduces the need to look after another person and to take care of her feelings, but it doesn't seem to really affect the relationship that men have with themselves. Rather than a transformation, men experience an "accommodation" to the partner's needs and desires, a negotiation and a reduction of self-centred attitudes and behaviour. What is important is that for men being single is not a lack or a state of incompleteness, but it's a form of self-centredness: this entails that love becomes a way to diminish the sense of wholeness. Men's subjectivity is perceived as already-whole: love gives men the opportunity to express their wholeness by providing something to the lacking-female-partner. This difference is expressed through the language of heterosexual love and the kind of gendered emotions implied: men are supportive, women are tender and caring; men take the proactive role of looking after their partners and providing things (responsibility, protectiveness), while they rarely consider themselves the object or recipient of such a care.

When they are in love, men and women engage in remarkably different types of work on their selves. “Men have a sense of possessiveness about their self,” so that their emotional work is mainly aimed at sustaining and defending the “authentic” self they imagine pre-exists the relationships. “For men, love demands a type of emotional work built around a maintenance of the parameters of the self rather than their removal” [p. 96]. Therefore men show a tension between wanting/needing to be loved and having to maintain and reproduce a masculine identity (perceived as emotionally detached and in control): they tend to resist to the kind of all-inclusive and all-consuming self-engagement shown by women, framing love as just one part of life. Feelings of independence and separateness are naturalised as causes while they are the effect of a gendered construction of subjectivities.

Men and women appropriate the discourses of love in profoundly different ways: interviewees’ accounts show that “whereas women experience the effects of love upon the self as a form of satisfying ‘something’ that is ‘missing,’ men reproduce themselves as the ones whose selves are already whole. These are not *real* differences between discrete ontological sexes which pre-exist their enactment. They are the outcomes, the real effects, of the ways in which heterosexuality organizes gender as a relational system through which masculine and feminine subjectivities emerge” [p. 100]. As a result, the author points out that “love is therefore not a ‘natural’ process which takes place in a socially constructed set of heterosexual relations. On the contrary, love is a carrier of heterosexuality, a vehicle of gender production, and a mechanism for transferring heteronormative social relations into enduring subjectivities and identifications” [p. 101].

In the last two chapters (4 and 5), the author shows how (hetero)sexual love is naturalised and taken for granted by analysing the boundary-work of distinguishing heterosexuality from homosexuality. If heterosexuality itself often remains silent and invisible, homosexuality is often spoken about to demarcate a visible distinction, to define margins and to make foundational claims about the self. As the author states: “The way in which we talk about attraction is often a vehicle for materializing sexuality rather than a result of it. The language of attraction does not automatically express some inner essence of sexuality; on the contrary, it is a way of accomplishing sexual identities” [p. 117].

Male interviewees express a repulsion regarding having sex, not falling in love with a same-sex partner: the homosexual male act (anal sex) is constructed as unnatural and disgusting, dirty, shitty, and messy. At the same time, men are aware that this feeling of disgust is unpolite and politically incorrect. “Therefore, the liberal language of sexuality, and the type of pluralism which Weeks (...) and Giddens (...) identify, can be seen, rather than to replace the boundaries of desire, to contribute to *disguising* them” [p. 112]. Some men refer to a “gut feeling” to stress how disgust is a natural expression of an inner self, that is a way to naturalise sexuality inside the body as a pre-social core of subjectivity, and to naturalise sexual preferences. Women feel disgust as well, but they tend not to focus it on a particular sexual act, and they express a deeper intimacy with same-sex friends (for example, sleeping together): female friendship involves physical contact, albeit not of a sexual nature. So women define a boundary between intimacy and sexual intimacy, between a loving relationship and a sexual-loving relationship. On the contrary, men tend to distinguish more between friendship and physical intimacy. The author points out that “what is at work here is a twofold

process of hiding the social construction of heterosexuality and establishing a normative and natural sexual identity: first, through a rejection of homosexuality as 'outside' of themselves, heterosexuals establish an ontological validity for their own identities and, second, as a consequence, their own intimate practices are naturalized" [p. 119].

As a conclusion, the book offers a theoretical and empirical study of heterosexuality as an institutionalised set of social practices and relations that produces and is reproduced by actions and identities framed within the cultural and normative discourse of love. However, some critical limits might be pointed out. First, the small size of the sample (only 24 interviewees) does not allow the author to consider the impact of variables like age (both in the sense of a cohort effect or a lifecourse effect) or the relational context: we would expect the use of a different vocabulary of motives by younger compared to older people, as well as by people involved in a long-term relationship compared to people who are single or at the beginning of a love-story. Secondly, to make references to a very wide range of social theory perspectives, if not only sociological (for instance, Foucault, Lacan, Butler), bears always the risk of an over-interpretation, especially in the case where the theoretical framework is stronger than empirical data.

Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto
Università di Torino