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Eva Illouz, "Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation." Cambridge: Polity, 2013, 304 pp.

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Book Review

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In *Why Love Hurts*, Eva Illouz employs a sociological lens to make sense of romantic pain within the context of late modernity. In what is primarily set up as a comparative exploration between pre-modern and modern practices of love, Illouz draws upon a wide range of data and intellectual thought to explore the socioeconomic and historical shifts through which embodied experiences of romantic pain arise. From works of Jane Austen, to dating blogs, to qualitative interviews, alongside engaging with thinkers from Freud to Marx, Bourdieu to Sartre, Illouz illuminates how institutional constraints underpin our experiences of love through the kinds of feeling practices they make available.

Throughout the book, Illouz takes a critical approach to the variety of love practices that contemporary (western) contexts espouse. In the introduction, Illouz argues that the “content, color, and texture” of love and its associated suffering has changed profoundly in modern times. Here, the rise of individuality, sedimentation of personal responsibility and the intensification of choice making give rise to a psychologised and reductive self perceived as free and unhindered by a broader context beyond the body. While once bound to societal practices that structure romantic compatibility and accessibility based on endogamy and other normative sociocultural requirements, modern love “would command us to follow the dictates of our heart, not of our social milieu” [p. 2].

From this ideological position, it follows that the suffering and misery a seemingly decontextualised and ahistorical self may experience through various stages of intimate relations may be explained through a variety of modalities from the surge of self-help books, to a range of prevailing psychologised repertoires that posit romantic misery as a self-made. Illouz argues that this over-burden of individual blame derived through “dysfunctional childhoods or insufficiently self-aware psyches” [p. 4] is deeply problematic in that it places unnecessary stress on the corporeal self. Here, Illouz seeks to explore these new kinds of suffering associated with love. This establishes a trajectory for the rest of the book, in which she goes on to explore what she describes as “something qualitatively new in the modern experience of suffering generated by love” [p. 16].

The second chapter outlines ways in which the social organisation of love in modernity has fundamentally changed. Illouz cites *choice* as being a critical driver in this change, and more specifically points towards two conditions within which romantic choices are made. The *ecology of choice*, or the emotional climate that constrains and enables certain forms of choice, and the *architecture of choice*, which refers to culturally mediated forms of evaluation and consultation that underpin decision making. Here, Illouz explores the processes of change which have occurred within and throughout each domain, arguing that decision making has moved from being embedded within cultural frameworks that emphasise excellence of character and moral dimensions that transcend desire and interest, to a focus on the abstracted self, her desires and acting authentically in line with such desires. Various influences from the sexual revolution to the popularity of dating sites and the increased possibilities they offer, to the weakening of endogamy have led to

a social organisation of modern decision making which focuses heavily on choice. Such conditions set up a decision making process that is more complex, more cognized, more taste driven, and increasingly subject to review. Emotion in modernity operates in line with the logic of capitalism and social actors accumulate sexual capital and associated social status. This presents issues for women who are tied to discourses of a “biological clock” for instance, in attempting to find men who will commit, as seemingly infinite opportunities to find the ideal partner lead to growing sense of “commitment phobia.”

For Illouz, contemporary social practices of autonomy and freedom of choice in partner selection that may produce such stress on modern subjects sit in stark contrast to the pre-modern situation where romantic decision making was overtly embedded and contingent upon socially organised signs, rituals and conditions. Partner choice was deeply bound up with cultural markers such as class appropriateness, socioeconomic status, and the positional gaze and referential standpoint of family and friends. Certainly, the pre-modern self’s love partnerships were heavily socially determined, but were also mobilised as vehicles to be held accountable to normative codes of moral virtue which allows partners to hold each other to standard that transcend culturally abstracted self desire. Illouz draws on *Sense and Sensibility* [1811] to illustrate this point. Here, Elinor Dashwood, the heroine, falls in love with Edward Ferras but comes to discover that he is secretly engaged to another woman, and “When later she is told that Edward has not broken his engagement to Lucy (which means he is about to marry her), she rejoices in *his* moral glory because breaking his promise to another would have made him morally unworthy” [p. 25]. This exemplifies one of the ways in which the failure of love does not impinge on the self to the extent that it might in our current cultural climate – where one’s inner sense of worth could well be tarnished.

The third chapter explores commitment phobia more explicitly. Here, changes in sexual relations between sexes are observed alongside meanings of marriage and sexuality in general. The institution of marriage which once offered a normative foundation for community membership changed from the 1960s and beyond in the face of changing moral standards, more efficient forms of contraception and less stigma attached to pregnancy out of marriage. The associated affirmation of freedom in the sexual sphere ushered in a greater transformation in emotional relations between heterosexual couples of which commitment phobia emerged as an associated phenomenon. For instance, such freedom coupled with an exponential rise in imagined and real choices of a love object (e.g., via the popularity of dating applications) has made it increasingly difficult to settle on a single person due to the way in which one may “anticipate regretting something they have willed” [p. 89]. Here, choice is both difficult in and of itself in the selection of a mate and problematic as a form of freedom in the face of unbounded opportunities.

The fourth chapter, amongst other things, notes the degree to which love in modernity incorporates a strong sense of self-worth embedded in the love object. Here, the breakdown of love thus has the potential for greater consequences for the foundation of the self. The ontological insecurity that comes with such suffering tends to advantage men. In a social milieu that privileges the value of autonomy, for instance, women who wish to pursue children and commitment are at a disadvantage. Indeed, increased competition for desirable partners and more opportunity to accumulate sexual experiences operate in a “free unregulated market where attributes – of beauty, sexiness, social class

– are rationally and instrumentally evaluated and exchanged” [p. 242], leading to new conditions such as disinclination to engage in long term relations. Illouz argues that this reluctance tends to benefit men who, for instance, have more time to explore the sexual field as they are not culturally and biologically tied to reproduction in the same ways women are.

The final chapters raise a range of issues, such as questioning the degree to which reason can provide meaning in our lives. Illouz describes it as “*the* fundamental question of modernity” [p. 157], and posits that emotion and rationality work in tandem. Self regulation and maximising choice, for instance, are two cultural structures currently at play within the emotion of love. Illouz goes on to explore the move from forms of desire that were previously directed towards love objects in concrete social realities to more autotelic forms of desire that tend to remain based in fantasy.

Overall, *Why Love Hurts* offers readers an interesting and thorough exploration into the ways in which the culture of love is practiced in modernity. Perhaps its main drawback, however, is its sole focus on privileged love – that is love as it tends to occur within a white, western and heteronormative framework. As such, this ignores an opportunity to engage with a broader patterning of social and institutional arrangements and associated human experiences that could very likely play an important role in informing the overarching thesis. Despite this, the book still manages to provide a convincing argument for the way in which embodied feelings and gender practices are deeply tied to wider cultural patterns. The relatively accessible nature of the book holds extensive reach, and will appeal to a wide range of actors from therapists, to lay people, to those interested in exploring how sociological methodology can be practically applied as a useful tool in deconstructing the status quo.

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