

Consuming Love, or What is Left of It

By Ana Tajder

In two seminal books, Eva Illouz analyses the influence of modern capitalism on love and romance. A perfect topic for Valentine's Day. Ana Tajder met Eva Illouz in Vienna.

Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism
Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism

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Will you be celebrating Valentine's Day? Will you buy roses, go for a dinner in a luxury restaurant, buy a little teddy bear with a big red heart? Or will you boycott that kitschy capitalistic product of American culture, condemning it as a crass celebration consumption?

Or will you simply be ambivalent?

Well, don't be. As Eva Illouz shows in her two books about the impact of capitalism on romance and love, the topic is too interesting for ambivalence.

Professor of Sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a member of the Center for the Study of Rationality Eva Illouz is ready to challenge the most entrenched cynic. Her earlier book, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1997) created a milestone in research of love and romance in capitalism. Following up on the topic was the 2007 *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, a sampling of her 'Adorno' lectures.

Whenever you finally meet a person you had found fascinating by reputation, you will be surprised about how much bigger you often imagine them than they really are. Our brain projects the size of our fascination with the person on their physical dimensions.

When I meet Eva Illouz, this surprise stretched even further, to the nature of her personality. Her books are so well researched, so strong in their analysis, conclusions, theories and findings that you expect a very powerful, maybe even insistent personality. A rock. The reality is quite different. Eva Illouz is petite, gracious, and with the most gentle expression in her huge blue eyes. Contrary to my expectation, she does not project, in fact, at all; she absorbs. Still, the gentleness of her appearance cannot hide the immense intellectual power working in the background.

A lot has changed in the ten years between the two books, Illouz confessed, and with it, a major shift in perspective. "Choice!" she exclaimed. In her first book, she explained how the economic ideas of choice emancipated human relationships and gave them new possibilities. Commodities did not corrupt relationships and feelings, she believed but served as a way of enhancing and transmitting those feelings. But then came the Internet and a culture of choice.

"The problem is, people don't know how to deal with choice," she said. "Studies have shown that choice creates confusion, apathy and a shift from being a satisfier, a person who is happy with good enough, to a maximizer, a person who always wants more and better.

“The problem is that we do not have a natural mechanism to stop the processes of maximizing our life choices.”

In her lecture on Jan. 26 at the Bruno Kreisky Forum, Ambrustergasse 15, in Vienna’s 19th District, Illouz analysed the disenchantment and rationalization of love that were central to the discussion in *Cold Intimacies*. Three cultural phenomena are principally to blame for this, she said: The Internet technology of dating sites and social networks that has exploded choice; the emergence of popular science that influences our picture of love, and second-wave feminism that blames romantic love for deepening the divide between men and women.

“Feminism tore down male chivalry and female mystery, taking the enchantment out of love,” claimed Illouz.

So is it back to pre-18th century mode of arranged marriages? No, modern rationality is different, Illouz said. Two hundred years ago, parents made the decisions, based on a few basic criteria: good health, social class and an ability to provide. Sentiment and reason were kept safely at arms length.

Today, this rationality comes from ourselves and hinges on a long list of criteria – including emotional compatibility, sexual compatibility and social compatibility. It is ideal that cannot be reached, one that gets us stuck in a rut of endless refinement.

“We don’t have the cultural resources to reach the ideal.” Illouz says.

The problem of choice cannot be emphasized often enough. While in pre-modern times, love was accidental and the object of love not subject to substitution, now the sheer volume of choice forces rational and analytic criteria. Choice also gives potential partners the characteristics of consumer goods and partners can always be “upgraded” for someone newer and better.

So while choice has given us freedom, especially improving the position of women in our society, now that freedom again puts women at a disadvantage. While men still have the socio-economic power and love is still the way for women to gain a piece of this power, the disadvantage lies in the dimension of time.

Men can profit from the choice their whole life long, especially if they are well situated. Women have a choice up until their early thirties. But at that point, if they want children and family, they must take the first choice that is “good enough”.

Eva Illouz is currently a researcher at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin. The topic for next book is “Why love hurts.” Now that’s a perfect Valentine’s present.

Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism

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