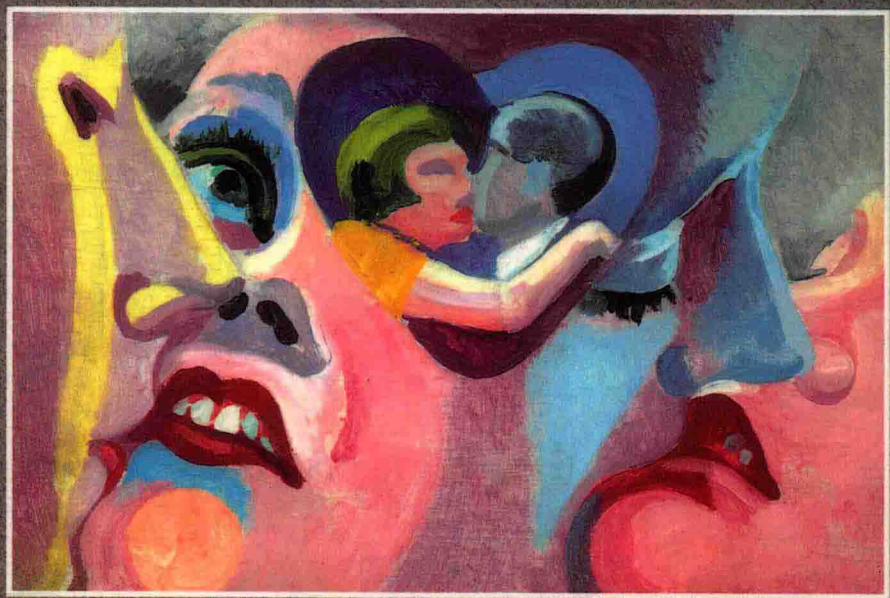


THE NORMAL
CHAOS OF
LOVE



Ulrich Beck and

Elisabeth
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The Normal Chaos of Love

Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth
Beck-Gernsheim

Translated by
Mark Ritter and Jane Wiebel

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AUTHORS' NOTE

We shared the writing of this book between us as follows: the Introduction was written jointly; chapters 1, 5 and 6 were written by Ulrich Beck; and chapters 2, 3 and 4 were written by Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim.

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INTRODUCTION

Individualization and ways of living and loving

'Why did you marry the man you did?' a daughter asks her mother in Michael Cunningham's novel *A Home at the End of the World*. 'You never worried that you might be making some sort of extended mistake, like losing track of your real life and going off on, I don't know, a tangent you could never return from?' Her mother 'waved the question away as if it were a sluggish but persistent fly. Her fingers were bright with tomato pulp. "We didn't ask such big questions then," she said. "Isn't it hard on you, to think and wonder and plan so much?"' (Cunningham 1991: 189-90).

In similar terms in his novel *The Burden of Proof* Scott Turow describes a father perplexed by his daughter's endless doubts about what the future holds for her: 'Listening to Sonny [his daughter], who was twisted about by impulse and emotion - beseeching, beleaguered, ironic, angry - it struck Stern that Clara [his wife] and he had had the benefit of certain good fortune. In his time, the definitions were clearer. Men and women of middle-class upbringing anywhere in the Western world desired to marry, to bear and rear children. Et cetera. Everyone traveled along the same ruts in the road. But for Sonny, marrying late in life, in the New Era, everything was a matter of choice. She got up in the morning and started from scratch, wondering about relationships, marriage, men, the erratic fellow she's chosen - who, from her description, still seemed to be half a boy. He was reminded of Marta, who often said she would find a male companion just as soon as she figured out what she needed one for' (Turow 1991: 349).

What is the 'New Era' all about? This book argues that one of its main features is a collision of interests between love, family and personal freedom. The nuclear family, built around gender status, is falling

apart on the issues of emancipation and equal rights, which no longer conveniently come to a halt outside our private lives. The result is the quite normal chaos called love.

If this diagnosis is right, what will take over from the family, that haven of domestic bliss? The family, of course! Only different, more, better: the negotiated family, the alternating family, the multiple family, new arrangements after divorce, remarriage, divorce again, new assortments from your, my, our children, our past and present families. It will be the expansion of the nuclear family and its extension in time; it will be an alliance between individuals as it always has been, and it will be glorified largely because it represents a sort of refuge in the chilly environment of our affluent, impersonal, uncertain society, stripped of its traditions and scarred by all kinds of risk. Love will become more important than ever and equally impossible.

Women and men are currently compulsively on the search for the right way to live, trying out cohabitation, divorce or contractual marriage, struggling to coordinate family and career, love and marriage, 'new' motherhood and fatherhood, friendship and acquaintance. This movement is under way, and there is no stopping it. One could call it the 'status struggle' which comes after the class struggle. In those countries where prosperity and social security have reached a high level, where peace and democratic rights are beginning to be taken for granted, the contradictions between family demands and personal freedom, or between family demands and love can no longer be concealed behind the daily struggle against misery and oppression. As traditional social identities gradually fade, the antagonisms between men and women over gender roles emerge in the very heart of the private sphere. In a whole range of trivial and important questions, ranging from who does the dishes to sex and fidelity and the attitudes which these reveal, these antagonisms are beginning to change society in obvious and less obvious ways. Weighed down by hopes, love seems to slip away because it is idolized by a society focused on the growth of the individual. And it is laden with more hopes the quicker it seems to vanish into thin air, bereft of any social ties.

Just because all this is taking place in the realm of love, it is happening secretly, in a disguised and covert manner. At first it is nothing more than a certain animosity between 'you' and 'me'. The tensions which love has always brought with it, and the great value we ascribe to it, do not make their appearance as contradictory social roles but as direct clashes between the people involved, in their characteristics, mistakes and oversights, resulting in a battleground for recriminations and attempts to escape. To put it more profanely, workers and managers also

understand their differences as personal problems, but at least they are not condemned to love one another, start a household, make a marriage work and bring up children together. In the domestic relationships between men and women, on the other hand, sharing a household makes every disagreement personal and painful. The couple's attempt to arrange everything individually, putting aside the demands of the world outside and creating their own world out of their love for one another, transforms the inherent incongruities into personal difficulties. The reason why the quarrels and arguments are so deeply hurtful is that they form part of the security system to which the couple, for want of any other firm emotional base, has entrusted itself.

Love has become inhospitable, and the ever higher hopes invested in it are meant to buttress it against the unpleasant reality of what seems like private betrayal. 'Everything will be better next time round': this consoling cliché combines both aspects: the hopelessness and the hope, elevating both and individualizing them. All this is comical, banal, tragicomic, sometimes even tragic, full of complications and confusions – and it is what the chapters of this book seek to recount. Perhaps people have simply lost track of other issues. Perhaps, however, weighed down by expectations and frustrations, 'love' is the new centre round which our detraditionalized life revolves. It may manifest itself as hope, betrayal, longing, jealousy – all addictions which afflict even such serious people as the Germans. This, then, is what we mean by the normal chaos of love.

Individualization: a new departure, a new society?

But whatever drives people to play off their freedom, their craving to be themselves and their ego trips against their families, of all things? Why this expedition into the most alien (because closest), holiest, most dangerous continent of your very own self? What *explains* this apparently highly individual but actually commonplace pattern, this zeal verging on obsession, this readiness to suffer, this widespread ruthlessness in tearing up one's own roots and ripping them apart to find out whether they are healthy?

In many people's view the answer is obvious. The individualists themselves are the problem, their wants and discontent, their thirst for excitement and diminishing willingness to fit in with others, to subordinate themselves or do without. A kind of universal *Zeitgeist* has seized hold of people, urging them to do their own thing, and its influence goes just as far as their ability to move heaven and earth, to blend their hopes with the reality around them.

The trouble with this explanation is that it raises further questions. How does one explain this simultaneous mass exodus from the family circle, the fact that so many lives are in upheaval? The millions of divorcees did not arrange this, nor do they have a trade union behind them recommending autonomy and the right to strike. As they understand it, they are defending themselves against a force which often threatens to overpower them, and they believe they are fighting on behalf of their own innermost wishes. It all looks and feels like a unique personal drama, clad in a highly individual costume, but in fact the premiere is being performed with very much the same props again and again in the most diverse languages in metropolises all over the world.

Why then are so many millions of people in so many countries deciding individually as if in a collective trance to abandon what used to be marital bliss and exchange it for a new dream, living together in an 'open marriage' beyond the safety net and the security of the law, or choosing to bring up a child single-handed? Why do they prefer to live on their own, pursuing ideas like independence, diversity, variety, continually leafing over new pages of their egos, long after the dream has started to resemble a nightmare? Is this an ego epidemic, a fever to be treated with ethics drops, poultices of 'us' and daily admonitions on the common good?

Or is it a pioneering expedition into new territory, a quest for better, if unfamiliar, solutions? Despite all their dazzling jousting with self-determination, could all these individuals be the agents of a deeper transformation? Are they the harbingers of a new age, a new relationship between individual and society? This would be a different kind of common ground, not based on a guaranteed consensus on the old precepts. It would emerge from individual biographies, from discussing and questioning each step, finding new arrangements, meeting new demands, justifying one's decisions, and would have to be protected from the centrifugal forces, the transience which threatens the order of our lives. This is the view and the theory presented in this book. Its keyword is *individualization*. Let us first explain what is meant by the term by comparing it with an example from the recent past.

Even late in the nineteenth century, when signs of crisis in the family were becoming perceptible, the fathers of the German Code of Civil Law (and it is certainly no coincidence that this child has only fathers) established marriage as an institution justified in and of itself, one which married people in particular have no business criticizing. 'Corresponding to the general Christian view of the German people,' one reads there (as if copied from a functionalist textbook, under the heading 'General value system'), 'the draft is based on the view that in marital law . . .

it is not the principle of individual freedom which should prevail, but rather that marriage is *to be viewed [as] a moral and legal order independent of the will of the spouses.*¹

Individualization intends and produces exactly the opposite principle. Biographies are removed from the traditional precepts and certainties, from external control and general moral laws, becoming open and dependent on decision-making, and are assigned as a task for each individual. The proportion of possibilities in life that do not involve decision-making is diminishing and the proportion of biography open to decision-making and individual initiative is increasing. Standard biography is transformed into 'choice biography' (Ley 1984), with all the compulsions and 'shivers of freedom' (von Wyszocki 1980) that are received in exchange.

To put our theme another way, it is no longer possible to pronounce in some binding way what family, marriage, parenthood, sexuality or love mean, what they should or could be; rather, these vary in substance, exceptions, norms and morality from individual to individual and from relationship to relationship. The answers to the questions above must be worked out, negotiated, arranged and justified in all the details of how, what, why or why not, even if this might unleash the conflicts and devils that lie slumbering among the details and were assumed to be tamed. Increasingly, the individuals who want to live together are, or more precisely are becoming, the legislators of their own way of life, the judges of their own transgressions, the priests who absolve their own sins and the therapists who loosen the bonds of their own past. They are also becoming, however, the avengers who retaliate for injuries sustained. Love is becoming a blank that the lovers must fill in themselves, across the widening trenches of biography, even if they are directed by the lyrics of pop songs, advertisements, pornographic scripts, light fiction or psychoanalysis.

Thanks to the Reformation, people were released from the arms of the church and the divinely ordained feudal hierarchy and into a social, bourgeois and industrial world that seemed to offer them virtually unlimited space to cultivate their interests and subjugate nature, using the drawing-board of technology. Similarly, in the comfort of normality and prosperity today, individuals are being released from certain duties by modern technology, which however is threatening to take over their lives and leads them to doubt any assertions about prosperity and progress. They are finding themselves in a lonely place, where they have to take over responsibility for themselves, make their own decisions and imperil their own lives and loves, tasks for which they are not prepared and for which their upbringing has not equipped them.

Individualization means that men and women are released from the gender roles prescribed by industrial society for life in the nuclear family. At the same time, and this aggravates the situation, they find themselves forced, under pain of material disadvantage, to build up a *life of their own* by way of the labour market, training and mobility, and if need be to pursue this life at the cost of their commitments to family, relations and friends.²

So what appears to be an individual struggle to break free and discover one's true self turns out to be also a general move conforming to a *general imperative*. This dictates that the individual's biography is planned round the labour market; it presupposes that he/she has some qualifications and is mobile, a requirement especially prized by those who invoke the importance of a happy family without allowing for its needs. The sense of freedom, and the actual freedoms which are upsetting the old picture of family life and encouraging the search for a new one, is not an individual invention but a late child of the labour market, buffered by the welfare state. It is in fact *labour market freedom*, which implies that everyone is free to conform to certain pressures and adapt to the requirements of the job market. And it is vital that you internalize these pressures, incorporating them in your own person, daily life and planning for the future, even though they inevitably collide with the demands of your family and the division of labour within it, which by its very nature excludes such imperatives.

Seen from outside or from a historical viewpoint, what appears to be an individual failure, mostly the fault of the female partner, is actually the failure of a family model which can mesh *one* labour market biography with a lifelong housework biography, but not *two* labour market biographies, since their inner logic demands that both partners have to put themselves first. Interlinking two such centrifugal biographies is a feat, a perilous balancing act, which was never expected so widely of previous generations but will be demanded of all coming ones as more and more women strive to emancipate themselves.

This is only one aspect. But it clearly reveals that in this whole cowboys-and-Indians game between the genders an unsuspected, alien, quite unerotic and asexual contradiction is surfacing: *the contradiction between the demands of the labour market and the demands of relationships* of whatever kind (family, marriage, motherhood, fatherhood, friendship). The ideal image conveyed by the labour market is that of a completely mobile individual regarding him/herself as a functioning flexible work unit, competitive and ambitious, prepared to disregard the social commitments linked to his/her existence and identity. This perfect employee fits in with the job requirements, prepared to move on whenever necessary.

The term individualization thus covers a complex, manifold, ambiguous phenomenon, or more precisely a social transformation; the variety of meanings have to be distinguished from one another, but all of them have practical implications which cannot be ignored. Seen from one angle it means freedom to choose, and from another pressure to conform to internalized demands, on the one hand being responsible for yourself and on the other being dependent on conditions which completely elude your grasp. So the very conditions which encourage individualism produce new, unfamiliar dependencies: *you are obliged to standardize your own existence*. The individuals freed of traditional constraints discover that they are governed by the labour market and are therefore dependent on training offers, social welfare regulations and benefits, from public transport to nursery school places and opening times, student grants and retirement plans.

To put it another way, a traditional marriage and family does not represent restriction nor does a modern individual life mean freedom. It is simply that one mixture containing both restriction and freedom is being replaced by another, which seems more modern and attractive. That it is better adapted to the challenges of our times is shown by the fact that hardly anyone wants to go back to the 'good old days', however nerve-racking things may be for oneself. There are of course a fair number of men who want to turn the clocks back, but not for themselves, only *for the women*.

Time-honoured norms are fading and losing their power to determine behaviour. What used to be carried out as a matter of course now has to be discussed, justified, negotiated and agreed, and for that very reason it can always be cancelled. In search of intimacy the actors turn out to be their own critics, directors and audience, acting, watching and discussing it, unable to agree on the rules for achieving it as fast as they are needed. The rules constantly prove to be wrong, unjust and therefore merely provisional. In such circumstances it seems almost like salvation to take refuge in rigidities, in new/old black-and-white thinking, 'period, that's it, enough.'

The resulting variety is full of peculiar and contradictory truths. Prohibitions are tried out and become normality. This is infectious, stirring up doubts even when people thought themselves safe in old certainties. Diversity requires tolerance, no doubt, but from the opposite point of view it can easily appear to be anomie, licence or moral anarchy, which must be halted with an iron hand. In this sense, the longing for traditional certainties should be decoded, both as an answer to fears of losing one's livelihood and social status, and as an answer to deep cultural uncertainties of the type that nestle into every niche, corner and level of everyday life in the wake of the individualization process. This is the

overheard faith in standards speaking up, anxiously witnessing how gender roles are crumbling even in everyday life, as it appeals for the salvation of fatherland, nation and the like.

Haven't there always been individualization processes?

Now one may ask, haven't there always been individualization processes? What about the ancient Greeks (Michel Foucault), the Renaissance (Jacob Burckhardt), the courtly culture of the Middle Ages (Norbert Elias), etc.³ It is true, individualization in the general sense of the word is nothing new, nothing that is showing up for the first time now in prosperous Germany. Although it seems to be the same, however, it has a different and perhaps not yet fully disclosed significance. One of the most important aspects is its mass character, the scope and systemic character of the current surge of individualization. It occurs in the wealthy Western industrialized countries as a side-effect of modernization processes designed to be long-term. As already mentioned, this is a kind of *labour market individualism* which should not be confused with resurrecting the legendary bourgeois citizen after the latter's well-documented demise. If in the olden days it was small groups, elite minorities, which could afford the luxury of concentrating on their own interests, nowadays the 'risky opportunities' (Heiner Keupp) associated with individualization are being *democratized* or, putting it more tersely, being brought about by the way we live – in the interplay between prosperity, education, mobility and the like.

In Germany the standard of living even of the lower groups in the social scale has improved 'spectacularly, comprehensively and in terms of social history in a revolutionary way' (Mooser 1983: 286), even though there have been severe setbacks in the past decade due to high unemployment. While earlier generations often knew nothing but the daily struggle for survival, a monotonous cycle of poverty and hunger, broad sections of the population have now reached a standard of living which enables them to plan and organize their own lives (accompanied by a widening gap between the rich and the poor). It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the progress made in the education field since the 1970s, especially in its consequences for women. 'The moment a woman began to read, the woman's issue was born' (Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, in Brinker-Gabler 1979: 17). Education opens the trap door: it allows the woman to escape from the restrictions of her existence as a housewife; it deprives inequality of its legitimation; it sharpens her sense of self-confidence and willingness to take up the

battle for prizes long denied; her own earnings strengthen her position within the marriage and free her from the need to remain married for purely economic reasons. All of this has not really removed the inequalities but it sharpens our awareness of them, and makes them seem unjust, annoying, politically motivated.⁴

Quite rightly you may object that these are generalizations from a few individual examples, and accuse us of exaggerating this minority trend and the likely future it promises. Individualization processes, in the sense used here, should however not be understood as abrupt changes of direction suddenly affecting everybody. In fact they are the outcome of long-term developments which start earlier in some places and later in others, so that a description of them seems like news from a strange far-off country to some, and to others a quite familiar account of their everyday lives. In Munich, Berlin and Frankfurt (to pick out only a few German cities with pronounced tendencies towards individualization as measured by the proportion of single-person households) the situation is completely different from that in rural areas such as East Frisia, Middle Franconia or Upper Bavaria.⁵ And just as there are craftsmen and farm workers in late industrial societies, there are still class distinctions, intact marriages and nuclear families in countries, regions and cities where individualization is very advanced. In a certain sense we can talk about the contours of an individualized society just as in the nineteenth century, with feudalism and social rank still omnipresent, one could talk of an industrial society. What is important is the trend and the forces at work which link together these modern developments.

Seen in this light, 'the' present does not exist; what is perceptible is, in Ernst Bloch's words, 'the simultaneousness of the non-contemporaneous' which the observer may sometimes list under one heading and sometimes under another. In the struggle between continuity and upheaval raging around and in us, reality is arming both sides. What Daniel Yankelovich describes for the United States, however, applies equally to Germany in this respect:

Continuity and far-reaching changes coexist in American life. American culture is so diverse that an observer who wants to emphasize its continuity can easily do so. Conversely, an observer can just as well document the changing nature of American life. The decisive question is always only this: have the important things stayed the same or have they changed? If the important things have changed... then they will permeate the boundaries of the culture and flow into our economic and political life. And if they are significant enough they will disrupt the continuity of our life in a decisive way. (In Zoll et al. 1989: 12)

The picture we are drawing is deliberately not balanced. The centre is occupied more by the emerging new than by the old and familiar. Attention is also drawn more to conflicts and crises than to successes. But it is precisely the turbulences which annoy people and drive them forward to face issues. As Heinrich Mann writes, 'An utterly happy age would probably not have any literature at all' (in Wander 1979: 8). And probably no social science either.

Perhaps this book contains two books, two versions of the same 'object' (to the extent that what the book deals with is 'objective' at all). We have not attempted to iron out or unsnarl the differences in what each of us has written separately in the chapters, after many conversations and common experiences. This results in overlaps, circling flows of thought and repetitions, which we have accepted (without wishing to dismiss criticism of them), among other reasons because that way the provisional, hypothetical and risky quality of our discussions remains clearly recognizable. Furthermore, attempting to write about the chaos of love as a couple with a single hand would be rather like trying to study the language of the Eskimos in Bermuda shorts.

The danger is obvious. In quite different circumstances, Ivan Illich tellingly described what we are also expecting of our readers of both genders: 'You may imagine our procedure like six climbs up the same peak or six rides on the broomstick around the big mountain. Some of you may even believe they are descending into the Inferno, the same hole over and over again, but (each time) . . . down a different spiral staircase' (Illich 1985: 18).

LOVE OR FREEDOM

Living together, apart or at war

Freedom, equality and love

One can love all sorts of things and people: Andalusia, one's grandmother, Goethe, black fishnet stockings against white skin, cheese sandwiches, the warm smile of a bosomy woman, fresh rolls, the movement of clouds *and* legs, Erna, Eva, Paul, Heinz-Dietrich – and one can do all this simultaneously, successively, excessively, silently, with hands, teeth, words, looks and great intensity. But sexual love (whatever form it takes) is so overwhelmingly powerful, so engrossing that we often reduce the vast range of our loving potential to longing for a caress, a word, a kiss – need I go on?

The everyday battle between the sexes, noisy or muted, inside, outside, before, after and alongside marriage is perhaps the most vivid measure of the hunger for love with which we assault each other. 'Paradise now!' is the cry of the worldly whose heaven or hell is here or nowhere. The cry echoes in the rage of the frustrated and those in pursuit of freedom, knowing that freedom plus freedom does not equal love, but more likely means a threat to it or even its end.

People marry for the sake of love and get divorced for the sake of love. Relationships are lived as if they were interchangeable, not because we want to cast off our burden of love but because the law of true love demands it. The latter-day tower of Babel built on divorce decrees is a monument to disappointed, overrated love. Even cynicism sometimes fails to conceal that it is an embittered late variant of love. People raise the drawbridges of their longings because this seems the only, the best way of protecting themselves against unbearable pain.

A lot of people speak of love and family as earlier centuries spoke