



*The Curious History of*

LOVE

Jean-Claude Kaufmann



# The Curious History of Love

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by David Macey

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First published in French as *L'étrange histoire de l'amour heureux* © Armand Colin, 2009

This English edition © Polity Press, 2011

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5153-8

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5154-5(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Sabon  
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group

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Monsieur Kaufmann

I am writing you this letter because I was very moved by your article 'The Economic Mistake' in Psychologies Magazine. I completely agree with you: there really is something we don't understand, and something is wrong with our modern world. The accumulation of wealth and facile consumerism are nothing more than screens that cover up a great psychological poverty. And intellectual poverty. It would be so nice to discover a storehouse of knowledge instead of all this media fuss about scraps of information that don't help us to understand anything. So I was very intrigued by the strange tale you tell about how a vision of the individual was invented, about how nothing was pre-ordained and about how it could all have been very different. I underlined this passage: 'Society has come to be centred on the economy, and the economy has come to be centred on an incredibly false and reductive vision of what human beings are. It is a hateful vision (the calculating individual is inevitably selfish). And it is a false vision because human beings do have feelings and are eager to give their lives a wider meaning.'

That's fascinating, and I agree completely. But your one failing is that you never offer any solution. That's fine. Perhaps you don't want to write self-help manuals, but you might at least show some commitment and tell us how we can replace that reductive vision with something else. Everyone knows that it can't last much longer and that the crisis we are going through is just a foretaste of things to come.

Personally, I think that the 'something else' has to be love. Why not make love the centre of society, why not live on hugs and kindness (and sex, for those who like that sort of thing)? I don't understand why we didn't try to base society upon love

a long time ago. And then I say to myself that someone must have tried, and that it didn't work. I'm thinking of the communities of May '68, which did not last long. I'd like to know more about all that. And while we're on the subject, I'd quite simply like to know how love works. I'm talking to the sociologist here, because I have the impression that scientists haven't dealt with this question directly. Apart from the biologists, who are all the rage these days. But they tell us that it's all to do with hormones. If only it were that simple! In their world, feelings become molecules, and that is as depressing as the world of the economists. No, what I'd like to know is how this happened in social terms (perhaps I should say 'in political terms' - I'm not too sure about that). Have there ever been societies that were centred on love, and how did they work out? It seems to me that, if we take that as our starting point, we might find out if it is possible to build a society on love, and how to set about building it.

I also have the feeling that this might provide us with some more personal clues as to how love works. We don't really know how it works any more. I don't want to tell you my life story, because that is not what this letter is about, but, like a lot of other women, I've had my share of disappointments. I was in a really miserable relationship, and I didn't even have the courage to get out of it and then one day he traded me in for a younger model. Bitch! I was so stunned that it took away all the pleasure of being a free woman again. I really liked your book The Single Woman and the Fairy-Tale Prince (Kaufmann 2008a [2006]) and it was a great help at the time. But it didn't give me any answers about the future. And now I'm very frightened about committing myself again. And the worst thing of all is that I'm so frightened of being swept off my feet in emotional terms even though I can fall in love at the drop of a hat. I

suppose that's the contradiction I have to live with:  
I dream of a society based upon love, but in per-  
sonal terms I keep my emotions in check because  
I'm afraid I'll be let down if I fall in love again.

Help me, doctor!

With my best wishes  
Isolde



Dear Isolde,

Thank you for your letter. An old-fashioned letter, hand-written and sent through the post. No name, no address, just your signature. 'Isolde' is obviously not your real name (no one is called Isolde these days) but as you will see, you could not have chosen a better pseudonym because we will be talking about Tristan later. You obviously don't expect an answer, and that's fine by me. I've had so much to say about love for so long, but I've never found a way to do it. I was frightened. Frightened of lapsing into boring academic clichés, which are the last thing we need in this domain, and frightened of looking intolerably pretentious (who can claim to tell the truth about love?). And frightened of being told: 'Just leave us alone with our passions and don't bother us with your academic twaddle!'

Your letter provides me with the opportunity I was waiting for, and gives me an excuse. So I'll make the most of it. Because I don't even know whether you will read this book, even though I wrote it with you in mind. It takes the form of a letter, an answer to your questions. The epistolary form allowed me to find the lightness of touch that we need when we are talking about a subject that is both very dense in historical terms and fiendishly complex. There is nothing simple about love.

# Introduction

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*Everything to do with Love is a mystery:  
His arrows, his quiver, his torch and his childhood.  
Exhausting this science is not  
Something that can be done in a day:  
So I make no claim to explain everything here*

Jean de la Fontaine, *L'Amour et la folie*

Your letter raises a lot of questions. Yes, there is a growing feeling that something is not right: modern society is cold, cruel and full of injustice, and it cannot make us happy. It satisfies our material needs almost too easily, but it is emotionally dead. All this could have been completely different if history had taken a different direction and if love had been able to establish itself as a political principle. Unfortunately, that did not happen. You ask me if anyone ever thought of building a society based on love, and consisting of caresses and kindness. The answer is 'yes'. In fact many people have tried to do so. Love dreamed of ruling the world for centuries. It failed. You are right when you say that scientists have not paid enough attention to analysing the feeling of love. The history of love's political failures, in particular, has yet to be written. And yet that history is essential if we wish to understand how we reached this point, and if we wish to know whether we

still stand some chance of introducing more gentleness and altruism into the management of human affairs.

You ask me – ‘quite simply’ – how love works. I think that it is impossible to explain that in any detail without retracing the whole history that has made love what it is today. The keys to understanding its history, and the more personal themes that you evoke, are to be found in a past of which we know little. A few behavioural rules are really not enough. Before we imagine how we could make better use of it today, in both social and individual terms, we have to understand where love comes from by understanding its surprising battles, its victories and defeats.

## OF LOVE

Love! It is impossible to say or write the word without feeling some emotion. Our lips do not say ‘love’ in the way that they say other words. The very word evokes hundreds and hundreds of years of impulses, caresses and dreams. Irrepressible desires and sublime passions. So it is difficult to adopt the detached stance of the cold scientist when we are talking about love. Stendhal learned that to his cost. He wanted to write a treatise that could accurately analyse the mechanisms of this precious feeling. Sadly, his categories and classifications struggled to say what three pages of one of his novels can convey so easily. Fortunately, there is more than that to *Love* (Stendhal 1975 [1822]). Many passages actually tell us about Stendhal’s own infatuation with the passionate Carbonora Métilde (Crouzet 1965). But we will come back to Stendhal in a moment, as he intervenes in a key episode in the story I will be telling.

Given that I have mentioned Stendhal, I ought to say a word about the novelists and poets. They have bequeathed us so much literature on love that they are a real problem for the poor researcher. (Has so much been written about any other theme?) How can we sort out what is and what is not acceptable from the scientific point of view? Should we even try to? Or should we try to put it into perspective, and try to explain how this type of literature came into existence, and what role it plays? That is what I have decided to do. Literature is not a distorted reflection of the reality of love: it tells us what forms love will take in future,

and it lies at the heart of the social factory where feelings are made.

The social factory? Yes, I know: the word 'love' suggests something personal and intimate. Indeed, nothing could be more personal and intimate, and that is what proves that it is a genuine feeling: 'Listen to what your heart tells you.' And love is right to evoke the heart because it is a profoundly emotional and subjective experience. We are all familiar with that side of love. But that is not what we will be talking about here. There is a very different side to the history of love.

If we take lived experience as a starting point, the history of love appears to be stable and straightforward. Some of the questions that have been asked about love for hundreds, if not thousands, of years even seem to suggest that it is a feeling that never changes, that has always existed, with only a few variations, in all societies. And yet nothing could be less like a peaceful river than the love factory (which produces the language of love, the ways of making love and the forms of feeling that any given society knows at any given period (Luhmann 1990 [1982])). On the contrary, it is the setting for bitter struggles between rival visions and for many an upheaval. And that, of course, is enough to provide the plot for my story. Take, for example, the curious fact that the dominant form of contemporary love – the quiet longing to be happy – is a direct descendant of the most tragic episodes of earlier eras. Anthony Giddens (1992) is right to say that love-as-passion has always existed, but that romanticism is a very special form of love that has left its mark on one moment in our history. But he ought to have added that the passions were never the same after romanticism. A major event had taken place, and it changed everyone's experience of love for ever.

Should we be talking about love or 'loves'? There are so many kinds of love that one wonders whether we can really talk about it in the singular – especially in languages like French or English, in which we can use the same word to say that 'I love' my wife, my car or my dog. What is the common factor between the passionate love we feel for one person, and the one, universal love we feel for other people in general; between the most animal physical desire, and the most sublime mystical passions? 'Depending on whether we are feeling gloomy or cheerful, timid or sensual or voluptuous, the common factor appears to be sorrow or pleasure,

languor or frenzy, constancy or lies, lust or purity' (Planhol 1921: 5). And yet, René de Planhol goes on, 'all these things really are aspects of love, either in turn or all at once. Love contains all these feelings.' Separating out all these different contents (passionate love, parental tenderness, human generosity, holy adoration . . .) certainly gives us an overview of what is going on. But it does not help us to understand what love really is, where it comes from or what hides behind its sudden and incomprehensible mood swings. The mystery, if there is one, lies in the fact that in it very different extremes are intimately bound up with one another, and that the heart of love is to be found in its contradictory dynamics. That explains, for example, how the blackest of tragedies could give birth to a gentle happiness.

The actual experience of love obviously knows nothing of these contradictions. It is precisely because it seems so simple that it feels so complete. Whatever form it takes, and whatever its content – and it can be either passionate or simply generous – it take us out of ourselves (out of the narrow, egotistical circle of the old self), attracts us to someone else, and makes us become attached to someone else. It creates something of a social bond, and it does so in the most intimate and sensual way. And because it all happens so quickly, we think that love is a sort of feeling that exists outside time, that it is a strictly personal adventure that takes place far away from society and its quarrels and debates. But it would be nothing without those quarrels and debates. We forget the extent to which, before they became minor personal issues, love and the passions were themes that were widely debated in the hope of changing the world. The journey on which we are about to embark may seem surprising because some of the lands we will be travelling through (the esoteric sophistication of religious thought and the violence of political struggles) look very unfamiliar. And yet we have to make that detour if we wish to understand what lies behind today's emotions. When someone whispers 'I love you' or when we feel their gentle touch, we sense this history, and that is what gives the words and gestures their specific form. We have to plunge into this distant past if we are to be able to answer the most concrete questions we are now asking ourselves.

The times we live in! They are cruel, and they are hard and uncaring. Life is an ordeal for the individual. The greatest capaci-

ties of the human mind are now being mobilized in an attempt to understand very minor technical issues (economic models) that are of no great interest in themselves. They are of no great interest either in terms of morality of knowledge, or in terms of any of the things that give life its grandeur and its savour. Is this real life? Of course it is not. Real life is obviously elsewhere, in the search for what it is that makes humanity human, in all that is best about the way we feel. Don't let the veneer of fashionable cynicism fool you: our desire for love is boundless. But as every episode in my history teaches us, desire is not, unfortunately, enough.

History is a science whose very name suggests the idea of a narrative plot. History and story originally meant the same thing: we wrote history by telling stories. And I would like the story I am telling to unfold in the same way. I may simplify things at times, and I will give my own interpretations a free rein (but I will, I believe, remain true to the essential facts), and I hope that the historians will forgive me.

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The favourite theme of the light comedy known in France as *théâtre de boulevard* is the classic schema of a clash between three characters (wife, husband, lover). Whilst there is nothing comic about the story I am about to tell, it too revolves mainly around three main characters. It seemed to me that it would be useful to introduce them briefly.

Our first two characters represent very different forms of love. Love obviously takes more than two forms: it is multifaceted and constantly changes. Yet despite all the variations, we can identify two essential forms. They are very different, and they are often rivals.

Our first character is the love that aspires to being universal, all-encompassing and systematic. It takes little heed of the specific qualities of the one it loves because the main thing is to go on loving for ever, and to love everyone. It wants to transcend its actual partner and to become a love that nothing can shake. It wants to subvert the planet with its generosity and self-sacrifice. This love has been heavily influenced by the Christian tradition ('Love thine enemy as thyself'), which has given it the name *agape*.

We also find it in the secular configuration of political utopias that are based upon the principle of mutual benevolence. And, in a more private form, in the internal solidarities that bind together families.

This form of love has two basic characteristics. Whilst it aspires to being universal, it is deeply rooted in reality, and accepts reality's limitations or shortcomings, even though it would prefer to overlook them. It is based upon a wisdom and an art and uses a loving gaze to metamorphose everything that the accidents of life throw up.

The second form of love is almost its complete antithesis. We are talking about passion, and there is nothing universal about passion. On the contrary, it singularizes everything. Its love-object is the only thing that matters, and everything else becomes invisible and of no importance. The real world loses its savour, and is of no interest. Passion takes us into a different world. This is a world that only those who are in love know about. Its dreams and feelings are so strong that it makes them forget all about ordinary life. Whereas *agape* actually loves what is ordinary, passion rejects it in the name of a more exciting ideal. And whereas *agape* is a tranquil wisdom, there is nothing tranquil about passion. It takes a lot of emotional intensity to wrest lovers away from the old world.

These two forms of love are not just variations on one another, and we cannot simply add them together. They are completely different, and any display of one weakens the other and vice versa. And that is, as it happens, one of the underlying reasons why love has never succeeded in ruling the world. The permanent confrontation between these two forms of love also allows our third character to make his entrance and – inevitably – to become the star of the show.

Our third character is very different, and is anti-love personified. It is cold and egotistic. How could such a hateful figure come to play the starring role? The story I am about to tell will explain that. For the moment, let us just say that, to begin with, it looks like something much more attractive. Reason outlined an enlightened programme that would allow us to understand society, and it associated its programme with a mutual benevolence. Unfortunately, it proved to be just as incapable of controlling the affairs of the world as love was. And so, Reason was reduced to



being nothing more than a minor technique: self-interested calculation. Everything that is noble about Reason was swept away, and all that remained was mean and despicable, namely cold calculation and selfish competition. Stripped of its more generous attributes, what should have been an economic model for the individual became a fearfully effective way of managing society. For better or for worse. Love had been defeated.

### SYNOPSIS

Our story begins long before our third character comes on stage. In ancient societies, thoughts and behaviours were governed by a system of shared values. There were many debates about the role that love should play, and about how it could become a form of government. I refer, of course, to the first form of love, which promoted a universal empathy, and whose social virtues were praised because it brought people together. At this time, passion had a very bad reputation. It took the form of anarchic eruptions that were stimulated by physical desire, and it posed a threat to the social order.

All this began to change in about the twelfth century, when passion suddenly began to look very different. It was no longer pure instinctual anarchy, and it now had a project of its own. It was, it has to be said, a very strange project that had emerged from the esoteric depths of hundreds and hundreds of years of thinking on the part of religious sects that were both marginal and extremist. It was also unrealistic, but it underwent a strange reversal: its public failure gave rise to new ways of behaving and thinking in our private lives. Many of our words and gestures still show its influence. The same process was repeated several times: the changes that occurred within the private realm and that strengthened it made up for all love's political failures. The gloom of a political project that could not be realized in this world gave way to the joyful colours of new love rituals.

Everything changed in about the twelfth century as individuals gradually shook off the yoke of society and tried to define their own values. Passion offered an alternative to the weight of tradition and the interference of the family. At this point, there was a moment of intense competition and conflict between the two



forms of love. Our third character immediately took advantage of this, and took the stage. He was discreet to begin with. He modestly offered to be of service, and to keep the social peace. He rejected the idea that passion might be a model for individual emancipation: all passion did was stir up unstable moods, and it might lead to all kinds of dreadful excesses. A sense of where one's interests lay and rational calculations also offered a model for individual emancipation and, our third character insisted, made it possible to put human relationships on a much more stable footing. We will go into this in more detail in Chapter 2, which tells the sad story of how the model of the selfish and calculating individual became central to the workings of society.

The tragedy is that, once this model had become central, it was impossible to displace it, and its hold became stronger and stronger. Vaguely aware that they had been caught in a trap, love's revolutionaries rebelled and tried to invent a different world. Some had no hesitation about taking up arms, whilst others peacefully dreamed up grandiose utopias. Romanticism finally gave passion a new lease of life. Chapter 3 will describe these magnificent, desperate attempts, which so often, sadly, ended in failure. But these political failures produced some remarkable innovations in the private realm. Romanticism, in particular, created a way of thinking that still has a more powerful influence on us than we might think.

The history of love takes place on two different levels. There are lots of fights in the factory where categories or representations are manufactured, and reversals of fortune are common. The evolution of behaviours, on the other hand, is much steadier. It is influenced by struggles over the definition of love, but it records them slowly, overcoming contradictions and smoothing out all the wrinkles. Chapter 4 describes how today's loving couple gradually came into being.

The final chapter looks at the contemporary situation, which is both tragic and wonderful. It is tragic because the 'calculating individual' model has become so powerful that it is now encroaching upon the private realm. Our choice of conjugal partner, in particular, is increasingly influenced by a consumerist logic (comparing products in order to find out which is best), and that makes commitment very problematic. And it is wonderful because, paradoxically enough, the woes of the world put us under an obliga-