

# GRIPES

THE LITTLE QUARRELS OF COUPLES



Jean-Claude Kaufmann

**GRIPES**

***THE LITTLE QUARRELS OF COUPLES***

**JEAN-CLAUDE KAUFMANN**

**Translated by Helen Morrison**

**polity**

First published in French as *Agacements* © Armand Colin, 2007

This English edition © Polity Press, 2009

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4361-8  
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4362-5 (paperback)

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

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon  
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire  
Printed and bound by MPG Books Group, UK

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: [www.politybooks.com](http://www.politybooks.com).

Ouvrage publié avec le concours du Ministère français de la Culture - Centre national du livre

Published with the assistance of the French Ministry of Culture - National Book Centre

# CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	1
---------------------	---

## **Part One 1 + 1 = 4**

1 The conjugal adventure	9
Domestic emotions	11
1 + 1 = 1?	14
Sparks start to fly	16
The comfort zone	22
Doubly irritating objects	25
Key episodes	28
2 Men and women – different or complementary?	34
The different approaches	36
Glitches	39
Are men less irritated?	45
Irritated by a spectre	50
Millions of Peter Pans?	52
Stubborn macho reactions	57

## **Part Two In the Eye of the Storm**

3 The causes	65
The symbolic toothpaste tube	66
Forced proximity	68
A waltz in double time	73
Traces of the self	77
Money matters	79
Secret worlds	81

## CONTENTS

	Too close	82
	Too distant	85
4	The mechanics	89
	The list	89
	Crystallization	95
	Letting off steam	97
	Aspects of identity	100
	'Passion killers' and the magic of love	102
	Confused feelings	105
	A certain notion of the truth	107
	Dissonance	109
5	The wider picture	112
	Family baggage	112
	'Mummy's boy'	114
	'That slut'	121
	Inattentiveness and humiliation	125
	Dissatisfaction	131
	Disgust	133
	Pathological irritability	135
	Aggravating social circumstances	137

### **Part Three Small Acts of Revenge and Romantic Tactics**

6	Communication difficulties	143
	An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth	143
	Hot and cold	145
	The language of gestures	147
	The use of laughter	150
	Inside the mind of the irritator	153
	Secret acts of revenge	156
7	Love's secret ways	163
	Minuscule victories	163
	The about-turn	165
	When irritation melts away	167
	Physical therapy	169
	Judicious use of sulking	172
	Seeing reason	176
	Reframing the scene	178
	The little private cinema and voice off	180
	Accentuating the positive	183
	Conclusion	186
	Methodological appendix	191

## CONTENTS

A new research technique	191
My direct correspondents	194
A research project cannot be emptied out like a bag	212
My other sources	213
<i>Bibliography</i>	215
<i>Index</i>	219

## INTRODUCTION

'Now that irritates me! That really gets on my nerves! It makes me furious! Yes of course, anyone can be a bit untidy – that's fair enough as long as it's confined to their own bit of space. You ask my neighbours how many times they've heard me yelling at my husband because he doesn't put stuff away; they're used to it. Not that it makes much difference really – except to make me feel better.' Generously, however, Agnès acknowledges that there are attenuating circumstances for the presumed guilty party by admitting that she is 'a bit obsessive' about housework. 'It's not as if housework is the be all and end all of my life. But when it doesn't get done, it really gets on my nerves!' And then, yet another attenuating circumstance, there is the issue of the ironing, where the roles of irritator and irritated are reversed. Whereas she immediately springs into action when there is tidying to be done, it is a very different story when it comes to ironing, the prospect of which fills her with weary reluctance. Overwhelmed by the tediousness of the task from the moment the torture table is in position, she finds it hard to summon up the slightest motivation. And worst of all is the sudden irritation which overwhelms her at the mere sight of the dreadful pile of ironing. A pile which inevitably keeps on growing. As a result, she has devised a little trick to get round the problem. 'When the sight of my ironing basket really starts to get on my nerves, I put it somewhere where I can't see it anymore, somewhere out of sight. It can just wait – it's not as if it has to be done that day.' Unfortunately for her though, next time she stumbles upon it, the irritation it provokes is even more intense.

This has given rise to the issue of the shirts, an issue which over the years has poisoned what has been, and still is, in every other respect a loving relationship. Happy couples have their stories too. Stories

which emerge simply by following the trail of the small (or not so small) irritations within the relationship.

Jean has never yet had to turn up to work without a freshly ironed shirt on his back. On numerous occasions, however, this minor domestic exploit has been achieved at the very last second, and only after he has had to run the gamut of a whole range of intense emotions: anxiety, anger, hatred! And, worst of all, the sound of Agnès's laughter. A loud and hearty laugh completely at odds with his own internal feelings. Jean decided the solution was to buy a professional ironing machine but this failed to make any significant difference. The problem was eventually resolved by employing someone to come in and do the ironing twice a week, which is currently what happens. No more wondering whether or not a shirt would be ironed in time, no more hurtful outbursts of laughter. Until the day when the sociologist asked them to confront their respective positions in a joint interview (each of them having previously been interviewed individually). The shirts were back in the spotlight once more; Agnès laughed so much she could barely speak while Jean struggled to keep his cool. Each recounted a totally different version of events, in terms of both tone and content.

AGNÈS: Ah, now that makes me laugh, that really makes me laugh!

JEAN: I don't find it funny at all – it's a serious matter!

The difference between them is even more acute when it comes to the thorny matter of buttons. 'I don't know how he manages it, but the buttons on his shirts are always coming unstitched. Now that really gets him going! . . . He gets so annoyed about it – it's quite incredible. It's true that when I'm ironing a shirt I might notice that the buttons are a bit loose. But that's as far as it goes – I don't pay that much attention. And then – as soon as he puts the shirt on, off flies a button!' Agnès bursts out laughing and laughs so much that she can hardly continue. 'At which point he loses his temper: "Can't you be a bit more attentive when you put my shirts away!" I think that's the only thing we get annoyed about as a couple – this business of buttons.' Fresh outburst of hilarity, from which she manages to pull herself together enough to conclude: 'It must really get on his nerves! Still – he needn't make such a big thing of it.' Jean does indeed make a big thing of it. He cannot understand this apparently over-aggressive attitude towards him, especially as he has tried on numerous occasions to explain his feelings to Agnès in a diplomatic manner. Worse of all



## INTRODUCTION

is that intolerable laughter which he finds so hurtful. She suspects him of some kind of 'mysterious' behaviour which results in the loss of so many shirt buttons. 'I don't understand how he manages it. Mine are perfectly OK.' He is convinced that the blame lies with industrial sewing techniques which are not sufficiently thorough and need reinforcing by hand. Since he never participates in any of the domestic chores, he dare not really be any more overt in blaming Agnès. Jean was brought up by his grandmother and he clearly remembers that the first thing she did whenever a new shirt was purchased was to re-sew all the buttons. Which is why, in the thick of the crisis (in spite of being married and having three children), he decided to take his shirts to his grandmother so she could reinforce the buttons. Which made Agnès laugh even more. In the end, (between the first interview and the joint confrontation), the problem was definitively resolved by having someone come in to do both ironing and mending.

One of my researchers received a phone call from Agnès out of the blue. Apparently she felt she had not told the whole story and wanted the opportunity to confide 'off the record'. It turned out that her laughter concealed a suffering, dating back to the day she first met Jean, the man she loves so much. Life is strange and can sometimes change course without us even realizing it is happening. Deeply in love with her handsome suitor, she was oblivious to the change of direction her life was taking. Yet she had given up all her professional ambitions for the sake of love, opting instead for an existence totally devoted to the home and the family. The future she could have had was beginning to haunt her dreams, initially in a rather pleasant guise, but then quickly becoming increasingly painful. We must not for an instant suspect Agnès of deliberately inventing the button saga as a strategy to get back at her husband – it evolved quite of its own accord. But very quickly she intuitively understood that this was her own secret little act of revenge, a way of compensating for her suppressed frustration and recovering her psychological stability. That laughter especially – in the face of poor Jean's irritation – was incredibly liberating. She thought she had found a relatively harmless way of making him pay. Sometimes the person causing irritation fails to appreciate how much the other person suffers.

The moral of this story, selected from many similar tales, takes us straight to the heart of the subject: irritation is never anodyne. Beneath its agitated surface lies an infinite universe of explanations. What an odd sensation, in truth, irritation turns out to be. Disagreeable, even acutely so at times, it nevertheless plays a fundamental role in the

way a couple is structured, and can sometimes even produce positive effects. Irritation must therefore be seen as a necessary evil. Its most remarkable feature is undoubtedly the fact that the mechanisms behind it turn out to be extraordinarily precise and by no means random. Close study of this area gives an original and illuminating perspective on the way conjugal relationships function. The subject also throws new light on the dynamics of the multiple identities of the individual. In other words, this book on minor irritations, could, against all expectations, have been written as a theoretical treatise, so rich and complex is its subject. I have chosen instead (for the moment at least) to concentrate on the human aspects of the subject, on the irresistible humour and edgy electricity which pervade these stories, rather than plunging into the deeper waters of a conceptual approach.

This journey into the realm of conjugal irritation promises – at least, so I hope – to be far from dull, even if, inevitably, there are the various prolegomena and definitions to be dealt with first. There is irritation and irritation. We have only to listen to the way people signal its presence to their entourage (ranging from the purely informative and straightforward ‘that gets on my nerves . . .’ to the violent shriek of ‘THAT GETS ON MY NERVES!!!!!’) to appreciate that it encompasses a range extending from simple intellectual annoyance to full-blown emotional outbursts capable of provoking the most extraordinary reactions. And yet, from one extreme to another, the mechanism behind irritation is always the same, invariably provoked by the same cause (dissonance) – a relatively unusual situation in the field of social science, increasingly fragmented and sometimes even overwhelmed by the complexity and the multiplicity of factors. It would have been unthinkable to have deprived ourselves of the power and intellectual comfort inherent in this explanatory simplicity. Yet to benefit from it requires a strict definition of irritation which is indeed close to a whole range of negative feelings (some quite clearly defined, others less so), which are not associated with the same mechanism and which therefore threaten to jeopardize precise analysis by blurring the boundaries. These would include bitterness, exasperation, resentment, vexation, impatience, malaise, frustration, disenchantment, dissatisfaction, disappointment, disgust, anger, etc. Several of these feelings and emotions have strong structural links with irritation. Anger, for example, which is sometimes the means through which irritation is expressed. Or dissatisfaction and disgust, both of which will be examined in due course. It is worth noting too that certain bio-psychological traits or particular social contexts can

## INTRODUCTION

predispose a tendency to irritability. Some consideration will be given to these chronically irritated individuals who are sometimes capable of turning violent. Yet the real essence of the subject lies elsewhere. Just as what causes conflicts within a couple is very different from what causes violence (Brown, Jaspard, 2004), irritation must not be reduced to dissatisfaction, to conflicts and, still less, to violence, if we are to understand it clearly. The best way to capture the subtle yet clear dynamics of irritation is to focus on the most ordinary of ordinary details of conjugal life, in other words on the happiest and most peaceful couples, the ones who could wrongly be said to have no story to tell.



## Part One

$$1 + 1 = 4$$



## THE CONJUGAL ADVENTURE

In reality it all starts with the individual. Our partners are not the only source of our irritation. We are quite capable of irritating ourselves too, for example when faced with a recalcitrant object like that item of flat-pack furniture we are trying to assemble, where screw no. 7 bears no resemblance whatsoever to the diagram; or, in Agnès's case, the pile of ironing. This contentious confrontation with objects provides a fascinating analytical opportunity to observe the extent to which we are not quite all we think we are. The prevailing view of man is that of a rational, thinking individual leading his life according to his own ideas. We embrace this view all the more eagerly in that it is precisely from this introspective standpoint that we observe the world, and ourselves. In actual fact, this is only a part of the whole picture, a very small part, no more than a single level of truth. Traditional sciences such as biology have acquired enough experience for those working in these fields to recognize that these different levels of truth exist and to adapt their work accordingly, selecting specific methods, categories and concepts, a vision and a language which differ radically from one level to another. Hidden beneath the observable body surface lie the circulatory and nervous systems with their own separate laws and, if we probe still deeper, specially adapted formulae enable us to unlock the secrets of molecular genetics, etc. Perhaps one day the same will be true of social sciences, with the particular challenge that, in this case, the mind is the focus of its own study, a complication which brings with it the attendant risks of egocentricity and cephalocentricity. The subject of irritation provides us with a unique opportunity to shift course and take a completely new look at the cultural depths of the individual.

Below the surface consciousness, each individual operates in a state of permanent flux, intimately associated with the familiar objects which surround them. Take the first moments of the day, for example: there is no need to ask ourselves where the breakfast cups are, or whether we should have tea or coffee or hot chocolate to drink. Most of our most basic gestures are triggered automatically. This is, however, no random process. When it comes to the most trivial aspects of daily life, no two individuals are the same. Each of us has built up our own personal stock of micro-references, the result of our own history, and it is these that govern our individual reflexes. A fortunate situation indeed, since without it we would find ourselves living in a state of constant mental exhaustion. Cognitive science has succeeded in identifying the specific location of this memory of ordinary things, referring to it as the 'infraconscious', or the 'cognitive unconscious', or the 'implicit memory' (Buser, 2005). In a more theoretical book (Kaufmann, 2001), I demonstrated how this memory functions in a dual complementary mode. On the one hand is the un-conscious brain studied by cognitive science, where pre-programmed guides to action set in train reflex movements. Such 'schemas' as many specialists call these guides, combine to form a sort of secret programme whereby each individual acts out the ordinary routines of his or her existence. On the other hand, there are the objects themselves, transformed through familiarity into a series of visual or tactile references to our everyday gestures. When I open the cupboard to take out my breakfast cup, I do so either without thinking at all, or thinking only in an extremely intuitive and rapid way. It is only if the cup is not in its usual place that I will experience surprise or need to reflect. The mildly unpleasant sensation such a discovery provokes involves a conflict between the two ways in which memory functions. The one which is external to the individual (the object) fails to correspond to the secret programme which dictates the appropriate sequence of gestures. In the case cited here, the dissonance is not particularly brutal and the only consequence may be the need to invoke a conscious thought process – well, where is my cup then? Irritation will be felt only if the cup cannot be found, or if it has been moved from its usual place for no good reason. In more critical contexts, the initial dissonance immediately provokes a feeling of irritation. The more sudden and intense this feeling is, the more urgent it becomes for the individual to restore coherence between the two conflicting elements of the self. In Agnès's case, that meant getting rid of that dreadful pile of ironing. By hiding it, provided



the pile was a reasonably small one, or, once it had become too big to be comfortably ignored, by summoning the energy to get it done. 'Once I've moved my ironing basket two or three times, I know that I can't hold out much longer. That sooner or later I'm going to have to get on with it.' It is not necessarily the object that must always be restored to its 'proper' place in order for the irritation to subside. The effect can also be achieved by an adjustment of the sub-conscious schema. 'That's all very well when it comes to shirts. But tea-towels – that just seems ridiculous. Jean doesn't give a damn what the tea-towels look like and neither do I really. So why, when I hate ironing so much, do I still insist on ironing the tea-towels?' Agnès could have stopped ironing the tea-towels, by making a conscious effort with the part of her (the secret blue-print) that was making her do something she considered 'ridiculous'. Instead she came up with a far more radical way of dealing with her irritation, deciding to give up ironing altogether and instead hand it over to be done by a professional. The irritation experienced on an individual level can indicate that a recurring contradiction between the two memories of the self remains unresolved: every night for the last thirty years Léon has been irritated by the sight of the untidy pile of clothes on the chair beside his bed. Alternatively, it can be simply a way of regulating action, as in the case of the ironing, for example, where the absence of any regular pattern, any fixed day of the week, etc., means that a decision about when it is done has to be made each time. Rational arguments are not always helpful in these circumstances: one argument might clearly indicate that the ironing should indeed be done today, while another suggests it should be put off until tomorrow. Some kind of emotional impetus is needed to clinch the decision (Damasio, 1995). In the case of love, the emotional impetus is an agreeable and pleasurable experience. When it comes to the ironing on the other hand, the emotion involved is not so agreeable. Provided it is not too insistent or too violent, irritation can often be a useful, even indispensable, way of provoking an action and reducing mental fatigue.

### Domestic emotions

Our relationship with the everyday objects that surround us is dictated by our own personal history. The domestic universe varies enormously from one family to another. The slightest speck of dust is enough to make Agnès spring to action, yet when it comes