

# CONSUMING

## THE ROMANTIC UTOPIA

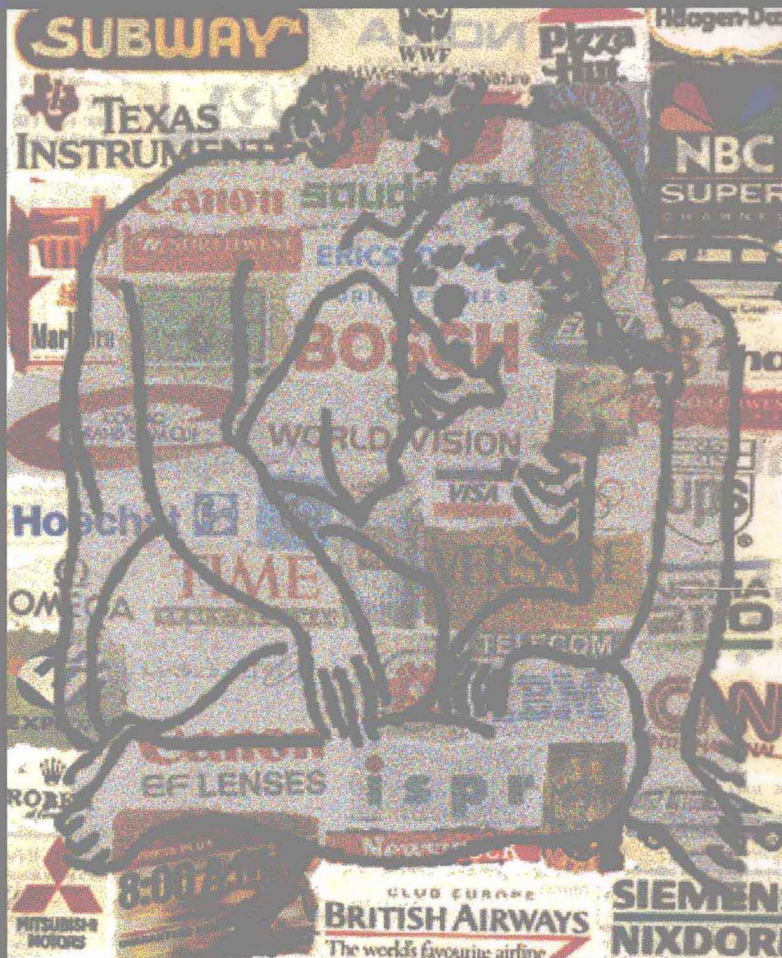
LOVE AND

THE CULTURAL

CONTRADICTIONS

OF CAPITALISM

EVA ILOUZ



# Consuming the Romantic Utopia

*Love and the Cultural  
Contradictions of Capitalism*

Eva Illouz

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# Consuming the Romantic Utopia

*This book is dedicated to Elchanan Ben-Porath*

Do you hear the neighing of the horses, the blaring of the trumpets, and the rattle of the drums?

I hear nothing, answered Sancho, but the bleating of the sheep and lambs.

Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

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# Introduction to the Sociology of Love

We would shiver a little at the coldness, severity, and calculating clarity of such a noble concept of marriage as has ruled in every healthy aristocracy, in ancient Athens as in the eighteenth century, we warm-blooded animals with sensitive hearts, we “moderns”! Precisely this is why love as a passion—in the great meaning of the word—was *invented* for the aristocratic world and in it, where constraint and privation were greatest.

*Nietzsche, The Will to Power*

Romantic love, we are told by some, is the last repository of the authenticity and the warmth that have been robbed from us by an increasingly technocratic and legalistic age. To others, it represents an ideology that enslaves women, a symptom of the demise of the public sphere, or a flight from social responsibility.

This book does not intend to be another voice celebrating the virtues of love or lamenting its failings. Rather, it aims to highlight the terms of this debate by examining how romantic love relates to the culture and class relationships of late capitalism. While many studies have examined the impact of capitalism on the self and on human relationships, this book addresses more seriously the question of how the encounter of love and capitalism occurred. This focus on the “how” is then about understanding the forms and the mechanisms through which romantic emotions intersect with the culture, the economy, and the social organization of advanced capitalism.

Capitalism is a notoriously Janus-like entity: to the extent that it promotes the incorporation of all social groups into the market, it has created a powerful common symbolic space unified by the twin spheres of consumption and mass media. But capitalism does not only unify; in its industrial phase it has brought about intense class conflicts; in its postindustrial phase it has fragmented social classes into

ever-smaller communities of consumption or lifestyle groups. Capitalism makes possible the participation of everyone in the economic and symbolic sphere of consumption, yet sustains and reproduces itself through the concentration of wealth and the legitimation of social divisions.

This book argues that the modern definitions and practices of romance are intertwined with this duality of consumer capitalism. Romantic love has become an intimate, indispensable part of the democratic ideal of affluence that has accompanied the emergence of the mass market, thereby offering a collective utopia cutting across and transcending social divisions. Concomitantly with that process, however, romantic love has espoused as it were the mechanisms of economic and symbolic domination at work in American social structure. The broad thesis of the book then is that romantic love is a collective arena within which the social divisions and the cultural contradictions of capitalism are played out.

## ROMANTIC LOVE AS A CULTURAL PRACTICE

As an economic system, capitalism “involv[es] the production and exchange of commodities with the aim of accumulating a surplus value, that is, profit, with some part of this profit being re-invested in order to maintain the conditions of future accumulation.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond this technical definition, however, capitalism is characterized by an entire cultural mind-set, in that “exchange relationships, that of buying and selling, have permeated most of the society.”<sup>2</sup> In capitalism, two parties come together explicitly on the basis of self-interest and mutual economic benefit; transactions are justified by calculating their effects on the “bottom line” of the balance sheet. In romantic love, by contrast, two individuals are bound together by the “capacity to realize spontaneity and empathy in an erotic relationship.”<sup>3</sup> In the marketplace, trading partners are ultimately interchangeable; relationships shift with economic circumstances. In romantic love, the person we love and feel united with is unique and irreplaceable; furthermore, “love is the most important thing in the world, to which all other considerations, particularly material ones, should be sacrificed.”<sup>4</sup> Romantic love is irrational rather than rational, gratuitous rather than profit-oriented, organic rather than utilitarian, private rather than public. In short, romantic love seems to evade the conventional categories within which capitalism has been conceived. In popular culture

and “common sense,” as well as in scholarship, romantic love stands above the realm of commodity exchange and even against the social order writ large.

Until the 1960s, anthropology, sociology, and history implicitly subscribed to this view.<sup>5</sup> Conceiving of culture as a public and collective practice, these disciplines equated emotions with subjective, physiological and psychological experiences, thus ultimately excluding them from the study of collective and symbolic life. Romantic love was inevitably relegated to the sociologically awkward sphere of private life rather than discussed in terms of public rituals, social conflict, or class relationships.

In the last two decades, however, new voices in anthropology and psychology have insisted that emotions are influenced and even shaped by the volatile “stuff” of culture: norms, language, stereotypes, metaphors, symbols.<sup>6</sup> But if most disciplines of the social sciences are willing today to profess a link between culture and emotion, they are more reluctant to acknowledge a connection between love and economy. Like art and religion, love “is the site par excellence of the denial of the social world” especially when this world takes the murky face of economic interest, and, like art or religion, romantic love denies its social basis through its claim to transcend or overturn it.<sup>7</sup> How then are the links between emotion, culture, and economy to be conceptualized?

“Emotions” are the complex conjunction of physiological arousal, perceptual mechanisms, and interpretive processes; they are thus situated at the threshold where the noncultural is encoded in culture, where body, cognition, and culture converge and merge.<sup>8</sup> As a cultural practice, then, romantic love is subject to the twin influence of the economic and political spheres; unlike other practices, however, romantic love implies an immediate experience of the body.

The social psychologists Schachter and Singer have offered a compelling account of just how and when a physiological arousal might become “love.”<sup>9</sup> They suggest that emotions are activated by a general and undifferentiated state of arousal, which becomes an emotion only when appropriately labeled. For example, the same general state of arousal could trigger either fear or infatuation, depending on environmental cues.<sup>10</sup> If this is indeed the case, we can then expect culture to play a considerable role in the construction, interpretation, and functioning of emotions. Culture operates as a *frame* within which emotional experience is organized, labeled, classified, and interpreted.<sup>11</sup> Cultural frames

name and define the emotion, set the limits of its intensity, specify the norms and values attached to it, and provide symbols and cultural scenarios that make it socially communicative.

In the evolution of sexual arousal to the codified sentiment of love, culture plays at least three roles. First, it provides meaning to physiological arousal by labeling it. For example, depending on one's cultural tradition (e.g., Christian, Romantic, scientific), sexual arousal can be variously construed as "recognition of two souls destined for each other," "love at first sight," "infatuation," "lust" (either a sin or a somewhat pleasurable irritant), or just "hormonal disorder." Similarly, the physiological arousal associated with jealousy may be interpreted as a sign of romantic passion, an expression of personal insecurity, or an attempt at control. Second, labels contain meanings embedded in bodies of norms, prescriptions, and prohibitions. For example, same-sex friendships might be interpreted as homosexual passions or as spiritual attachments, depending on the range of authorized interpretations. Furthermore, not only does the normative context determine the definition of a given emotion, but people can manage and control their emotions in order to conform to cultural norms, a process that has been called "emotion work" by sociologist Arlie Hochschild.<sup>12</sup>

Third, cultural values stipulate how to evaluate the intensity of physiological arousal. For example, the Romantic tradition would most likely privilege its initial and most intense stage, whereas realist traditions might favor its declining intensity and less turbulent manifestations as exemplifying "true" love. In contemporary culture, two equally powerful repertoires are used to make sense of, express, or control the various stages of the romantic bond: in the main, the initial stages of attraction and the romantic sentiment are expressed in the cultural institution of "dating" and are imbricated with the hedonist values of postmodern culture. On the other hand, the stability and longevity procured by a slow-paced, incremental, and long-lasting love are associated with the institution of marriage and are framed in a blend of therapeutic and economic terms.

Fourth, culture provides symbols, artifacts, stories, and images—symbolic "snapshots"—in which romantic feelings can be recapitulated and communicated. These symbols are often literally photographs—for example, the "romantic" photograph summarizing a couple's vacation or honeymoon and picturing them closely embraced on the beach at sundown—or the memory of past love might take the form of a letter or gift, or a story capturing the vivid uniqueness of the relationship.



The repertoire of images, artifacts, and stories offered by contemporary culture is varied but limited, and some of these cultural symbols are more readily available than others. This is precisely my point of interrogation: How does one cultural vocabulary of sentiments become more visible and more publicly available than another? Why is the image of a couple walking hand-in-hand along the sea more prevalent than the image of a man and a woman casually watching television? Why do most people remember short-lived and intense affairs more easily than slow-paced relationships? Why does a long conversation convey more aptly feelings of “intimacy” and “romance” than attending a basketball game?

Such questions form the backbone of this study and already give clues as to what this book is *not* about. It is not about the phenomenology of love, insofar as it does not interrogate romantic love from “inside,” as a reality *sui generis*, and does not decompose it into categories constitutive of its experience (e.g., “the encounter,” “the first kiss,” “the caresses,” “the communication,” “the sexual bond,” et cetera). This also explains why the issue of sexuality is obliquely rather than frontally addressed. While it is an undoubtedly crucial element of contemporary romantic experiences, sexuality is subordinated to the same cultural discourses of self-realization, hedonism, and self-knowledge that form the backbone of our culture of love. This book is also not about romantic love as it is usually, and narrowly, defined by cultural historians, that is, as a passionate and absolute longing for someone cast in the language of religious devotion. The material explored here is more diffuse and volatile than such attempts to delimit it would suggest.

This book places in a critical context the multifarious feelings implied in the expression “to be romantically involved with somebody.” Although it studies many of the stages of “romantic involvement”—initial attraction, dating, marriage—it does not do so chronologically, for my interest is not in telling the story of contemporary love. Rather, it is in bringing love within the traditional business of cultural sociology and submitting it to questions of which tacit meanings and symbols organize our romantic experience and why precisely these and not others.

Definitions of culture somewhat muddle rather than clarify this issue. One definition, provided by anthropologist Clifford Geertz and now almost canonical, suggests that it is a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [*sic*] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>13</sup> This definition purposely refuses the question of the “ultimate”