

## **PUBLIC LIVES**

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### **The ideology of love**

To call love an ideology would seem to trivialize what is generally assumed to be a deeply personal and indescribable experience. The word “ideology” is normally associated with politics. It suggests a particular vision of the world, a set of concepts, and a proposed way of acting that is consistent with this vision and illuminated by these concepts. But, recent writings like Niklas Luhmann’s wonderful book, “Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy,” are blazing new trails by precisely examining love as an evolving form of communication – one that is informed by a distinct semantics or ideology of love.

In short, we learn how to “love,” how to express and expect it, by reading about it, or – perhaps more commonly these days – by hearing it on radio or watching images of it on television and the movies. The ideology of love enables us to ascertain if we are having a “romantic” experience. If we are, it also instructs us, more or less, how to communicate it, how to anticipate it, how to sustain it, and how to deal with its flickering or eventual loss.

The institution of marriage is an older concept. In an earlier time, people did not get married because they were in love. They married in order to strengthen existing families. This was particularly true among upper class families, whose survival was seen as crucial to the preservation of a reigning social order. Thus, arranged marriages were the norm in traditional society. In 17th century Europe, says Luhmann, a declaration of love had to be supported by a second declaration – “it had to be said or proven that the lover was a prince or a suitor of the same rank as the lady.” But, by the 19th century, when society had become more modern, this declaration of one’s station in life “was replaced by the declaration of one’s intention to marry.”

It is perhaps not a coincidence that even in our present society, families in the lower social strata do not give marriage the same value that the elites confer upon it. Conjugal unions among the poor are much less formal. They have their own rationality, but are not necessarily dictated either by the presence of romantic love.

Interestingly, writes Luhmann, the language of romantic love emerged in the context of extra-marital relationships. This is where the semantics of passionate love first takes shape. Beyond the sexual union in which it is anchored, “amour passion,” as the French called it, promoted a language of intimate relationship that was previously unknown. What bound the lover and the Other to each other was not so much the sex, but the shared intimacy. Luhmann coins the term “interpersonal interpenetration” to distinguish the relationship of intimacy that is enacted in passionate love from other forms of human relationships. The concept basically refers to a sharing of personal worlds by two lovers, while conceding to each other the right to their own world. It is not total integration, but, precisely, interpenetration.

By a paradoxical turn of events, this model of intimate relationship first spawned by extra-marital affairs became the standard by which all marital unions in modern times were to be measured. Marriages lost their reason for being as soon as love vanished. The ideology of love sought to stabilize love through marriage. Then, in the face of love’s instability, it tried to compensate for the uncertainties of this elusive pairing by offering divorce or annulment as a remedy.

What thus became threatened is the institution of marriage itself, the founding of families, and the continuation of human society. Nietzsche perhaps expressed it best: “Modern marriage has patently lost all its rationality: and yet this is no objection to marriage, rather to modernity.... The rationality of marriage lay in the principle of its indissolubility; this gave it an accent which, set against the contingencies of feeling, passion, and the moment, could make itself heard.... The increasing indulgence shown

towards love-matches has practically eliminated the basis for marriage, the thing which makes it an institution in the first place. An institution can never be founded on an idiosyncrasy.”

Nietzsche was reacting to the prevailing ideology of modern love. But if he had been a sociologist like Luhmann, he might have known that human beings in real life can be more mature and that the language of love itself continues to evolve. Looking into the future, Luhmann surmised, “...love lays down its own laws, not abstractly, but concretely in each case, and only with validity for that case. What will have to be conceded more radically than ever before is that love itself cancels out all the characteristics which could have served as a basis and a motive for it.” How true!

Recently, the formal break-up of a marriage made the front page of a broadsheet. The individuals involved, married for 21 years, are scions of prominent families. The union had apparently collapsed much earlier, after it became known that the husband had an 8-year-old love child from another relationship. What is interesting is what the wife was prepared to do to save the marriage. “To be honest, I was willing to wait forever,” she said. “I was ready to forgive him for everything. I gave it up to December. If he had come back, I would have taken him back, no questions asked.”

What finally broke the marriage, it seems, was not so much the evaporation of love, but the manner in which the man flaunted his infidelity. It projected the loss of respect, and made the claim of a marital union untenable.

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