

The End of Love

A Sociology of Negative Relations

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your happiness and your larger sense of self—there was no question. Obviously the latter. Obviously that's what I wanted to show them."⁶³

Here, divorce is no longer the wrenching experience that it is for many, but is rather the glamorous mark of freedom, the freedom that has been painfully crafted for us by the technological, therapeutic, and consumer institutions of modernity. We may wonder how glib that freedom is.

Conclusion

Negative Relations and the Butterfly Politics of Sex

Les gens n'aiment pas que Ion explique des choses qu'ils veulent garder "absolues." Moi, je trouve qu'il vaut mieux savoir. C'est très bizarre que Ion supporte si mal le réalisme. Dans le fond, la sociologie est très proche de ce qu'on appelle la sagesse. Elle apprend à se méfier des mystifications. Je préfère me débarrasser des faux enchantements pour pouvoir m'émouvoir des vrais "miracles." En sachant qu'ils sont précieux parce qu'ils sont fragiles.

—Pierre Bourdieu¹

People don't like other people to explain to them the things they would like to maintain as absolute. As for me, I think it is better to know. It is very bizarre that we can bear so little realism. In the end, sociology is very close to what we call wisdom. It teaches to be cautious with mystifications. I prefer to get rid of false enchantments in order to be awed by true miracles. Knowing that they are precious because they are fragile.

—Author's Translation

I shall offer to the mind all its sorrows, all its mourning garments: this will not be a gentle prescription for healing, but cauterizing and the knife.

—Seneca²

In his controversial novel *Submission* (2015) Michel Houellebecq describes the near future where France will choose as its president an Islamist with a benevolent face. This collective shift is dramatized as a moral surrender in the person of François, an academic specializing in nineteenth-century literature. Throughout the novel, François faces the choice of converting to Islam or maintaining his morose and hedonist French secular identity. The first would entail a professional promotion, money, and access to multiple women who would serve him sexually and domestically in the legitimate

frame of polygamy. The second would mean continuing a life punctuated by different episodes of casual or uncommitted sex and ongoing existential boredom. Ultimately, he is compelled to "submit" (convert to Islam) and it is the promise of the domestic and sexual services that will be provided by a submissive woman that ultimately convinces him to "surrender." This novel resonates and brings to a conclusion the preoccupation of two of Houellebecq's previous novels, *Whatever* (published in 1994 in French) and *Atomized* (published in 1998 in French). The first novel is the story of a man ("our hero") who ultimately commits suicide because he is unable to perform well in a sexual market increasingly governed by intense competitiveness. The second describes the post-1968 frantic search for authenticity through sex and its outcome in a new metaphysical void. Ultimately, the novel offers the vision of a humanity freed from the misery of sexuality through cloning. What these three novels have in common is their view of sexuality as central to contemporary societies, as a source of existential disarray and, ultimately, as a cause for political discontent and civilizational change. In the same way that Henry James, Balzac, or Zola examined in their novels the massive shift from pre-modern hierarchy and cosmos to a society governed by exchange and money, Houellebecq is the novelist who has examined the shift to a society governed by sexual freedom: consumption, social relationships, and politics are all somewhat imbued with a sexuality that dislocates "classic" social arrangements. More so, in Houellebecq's fictional universe the very future (and demise) of Western civilization lies in its (de)regulation of sexuality.

Casual sexuality and the sexualization of relationships may seem peripheral to the main problems of societies (only when framed as "economic" or "political" do problems seem to become "important") but they play a crucial role in the economy, demography, politics, and identity of all societies, and contemporary societies in particular. This is because, as phenomenological philosophers and feminist scholars have consistently claimed, the body is a crucial dimension of (social) existence.³ Simone de Beauvoir put this point apply in an entirely phenomenological vein:

Our body is not first posited in the world the way a tree or a rock is. It lives in the world; it is our general way of having a world. It expresses our existence, which signifies not that it is an exterior accompaniment of our existence, but that our existence realizes itself in it.⁴

The body is the site where social existence accomplishes itself. The fact then that the sexualized body has become an essential unit of consumer capitalism, of intimacy, marriage, and even (ironically) of sexual relationships themselves, deserves the attention of sociologists, economists, philosophers, and policy makers. We follow here in the trail of Catherine Mackinnon's notion of "what she calls 'butterfly politics': that small microscopic changes can bring about large changes in the same way that according to chaos theory, the flapping of a butterfly's wings somewhere on earth can bring about massive weather changes somewhere else a few weeks later (known as the butterfly effect).⁵ In a way, this book has described the butterfly politics of sex: seemingly fleeting moments and elusive phenomena both reflect and bring about large changes for the family and for the economy.

In his classical *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm opposed positive to negative freedom: "Freedom, though it has brought him [man] independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless."⁶ Freedom for Fromm has a deep psychosocial effect; it produces anxiety that explains why some will prefer to give away their freedom to totalitarian regimes (or to misogynist ideologies, to family values, etc.). What Fromm did not and perhaps could not perceive, was that the anxiety of freedom was a direct effect of the injunction to self-realization and not its opposite. Far from standing opposed, positive and negative freedom can hardly be separated. What has made freedom into such a normatively troubled and ambiguous phenomenon was the fact that it was the ideological banner of political social movements, of a hedonic ethics of authenticity and, above all, as this book has stressed, of scopie capitalism—the intensive and ubiquitous form of exploitation of the sexual body through visual industries. Scopie capitalism has become the dominant frame organizing the images and stories that have made freedom into a concrete and lived reality for members of Western societies. This is why, I have argued, the normative ideal of freedom to realize one's projects and definition of the good life has morphed into negative relationships shaped by the consumer market and technology. The affinities between negative relationships and scopie capitalism have been the main thread running through this book. Let me draw this thread.

The first such affinity is to be found in the emergence of markets as sociological frames that organize encounters. Markets are social arenas where actors exchange something and that are governed by supply and demand. Where in traditional marriage men and women were paired (more or less) horizontally (within their social group) and aimed to maximize property and wealth, in sexual markets men and women pair according to sexual capital, for a variety of

purposes (economic, hedonic, emotional), often come from different social groups and backgrounds (cultural, religious, ethnic, or social), and often exchange asymmetrical attributes (e.g., beauty vs. social status). The second affinity between capitalism and negative relationships also derives from its market-form. Its prototypical unit is casual sex, an interaction between strangers who aim each at the satisfaction of a utility, thus mimicking the consumer interaction and its hedonic premises (consumer culture equally mirrors sexuality).

The third affinity stems from the fact that a sexuality governed by scopie capitalism generates different forms of economic and social value for men and women. Through the consumer market, women groom their bodies to produce value, at once economic and sexual, while men consume women's production of their sexual value as status markers in arenas of male competition.

A fourth affinity between negative relationships and capitalism concerns the uncertainty about the value of what is transacted. Uncertainty about one's own and others' value is pervasive, all the more that scopie capitalism makes the value of selves quickly obsolete. The demand for subjective value has increased (in the form of "self-esteem," "self-love," and "self-confidence") thus creating defensive strategies to perceived threats to one's value.

And finally, the fifth affinity is to be found in the difficulty to hold on to or to form emotional contracts because innovation, geographical mobility, investments in various lucrative fields, and flexibility in lines of production and workforce render corporations uncommitted entities. All of these form the backbone of what I have called negative relationships and point to the ways in which intimate relationships, sexuality, and the family reflect and appropriate characteristics of the market of consumer practices, and of capitalist workplaces. Negative relationships have two properties: they are indeterminate (I cannot say in a final way what I want and who I am in them) and they are characterized by the fact they point to a breakdown in normal ways of doing things. Perhaps one of the most important claims of this book is that specific negative dynamics, shaped by social and economic forces, determine (if that is the right word) the non-formation of bonds and established bonds that dissolve. The evaporation of relationships and the breakdown of stable attachments are different psychological responses to a common matrix of cultural, economic, and social forces. Scopie capitalism has had a deep impact on sources of self-worth, on generating new sources of uncertainty, and on creating new forms of social hierarchy, disturbing what I would call traditional processes of recognition, how people feel worthwhile in the eyes of others, especially how women feel worthwhile in the eyes of the men who continue

to control and organize their social lives. Organized under the aegis of neoliberalism, scopie capitalism creates a selfhood in which economy and sex are seamlessly intertwined and mutually perform each other.

A new structure of feeling has emerged that crosses, pervades, and bridges the economic and sexual realms and generates a romantic and sexual selfhood that has a number of defining characteristics: flexibility (in the capacity to move between a multiplicity of partners and in the capacity to accumulate experiences and multitask); resilience to risk, failures, and rejections; and built-in disloyalty (like shareholders, lovers may leave to invest in a more profitable "enterprise"). Sexual agents, like economic agents, operate with an acute awareness of competition and develop skills of self-reliance as well as a pervasive sense of precariousness. Pervasive insecurity coexists with competitiveness and lack of trust. As a result, sexual agents develop techniques to defend their self-worth, alleviate anxiety, increase their (emotional) performance, and make investments in uncertain futures, all provided by the expanding market of self-help, psychology, and spirituality.

What this new situation means for sexuality and intimacy is ambiguous. There is no doubt that the ideal of freedom has fulfilled some or many of its promises, as women and men now move more freely in the sexual arena, approach domesticity on equal terms and are more entitled to make sexual pleasure a dimension of the good life. There is no doubt too that in the realm of sexuality, sexual freedom has also entailed a greater equality between the sexes. Overall, sexual freedom has attenuated the binary of gender roles in sexuality, the equation of desire with repression and prohibition. But freedom is too ample a term not to contain and maybe hide different logics. Because it has been harnessed to the goals and interests of scopie capitalism, freedom deepens inequalities, some of which preceded scopie capitalism (gender inequalities) and some of which have been created by it. Both old and new inequalities have enough negative effects to make freedom a pristine ideal with disquieting consequences.

The year 2018 had a strange Houellebecqian resonance and saw the rise of a new form of terrorism, neither religious nor political but sexual. Around the end of April 2018, a young man by the name of Alek Minnassian killed ten or more people in the city of Toronto,⁷ mostly women.

How much Minnassian was mentally disturbed is unclear. What is uncontroversial however is the fact he subscribed to the violent ideology of incels, an online community of men united in their hatred for women because, in their view, men are entitled to sex and attention from women, yet are denied such sex and attention by women who prefer other men.

Tragically and ironically, the word *incel* had a very different beginning. It had been coined two decades earlier by a woman named Alana who, in reference to her own involuntary celibacy, wanted to create a supportive Internet community of people who had been unable to have sex or to be in a relationship.⁸ The word was recuperated by misogynist incels who divide the world in two classes, Chads and Stacy's, men and women, who are not only sexually attractive but also sexually attractive to each other.

We can (and should) express moral outrage at the phenomenon of incels. But it is far more productive and interesting to understand the social conditions that make possible such phenomena.

Sociologically, incels are relevant to this study to the extent that they are the most extreme and disturbing manifestation of the transformation of sexuality through the new social hierarchies generated by scopio capitalism. Incels perceive themselves as excluded from a social order where sexually bestows status and is synonymous with the good life and with normative masculinity. Misogynist or not, incels are the (violent) manifestation of a new social order in which sexuality and intimacy are signs of social status and even social membership. To be deprived of sexuality and sexual intimacy is, as Houellebecq's novel *Whatever* showed some two decades ago, to be deprived of a social existence. While for some sexuality is the arena for the exercise of freedom, for others it entails "involuntary" (and coerced) experiences of humiliation and exclusion. In that sense, incels are located at the tectonic fault line between traditional (violent) patriarchy and high-velocity forms of technological and scopio capitalism. Scopio capitalism creates new forms of social rankings and privileges, transforming and reinforcing old modes of domination of women, while using values of freedom, liberation, and emancipation.

Sexual hierarchies, like social or cultural hierarchies, are maintained through a process of "distinction." According to Pierre Bourdieu, "distinction" is the mental and structural process by which we distinguish ourselves from members of other groups, dismissing their tastes, for example, while affirming ours.⁹ "Sexual distinction" is the mechanism at the heart of romantic identity and sexual status. Distinction is achieved through the process of rejecting others (and being rejected by them). Sexual distinction in that sense differs from class distinction: while the latter rests on the capacity to establish both value and value differences, the former struggles to properly establish the value of the sexual object. While class distinction is about cultural objects and consumer practices, sexual distinction is about people and affects directly their sense of worth. "Involuntary celibate" is a

manifestation of such (negative) sexual distinction and more especially of the routine exercise of the freedom to reject others, which in turn creates entangling routine experiences of self-devaluation.

Being emotionally "unwanted" and sexually "undesired" is not a new form of social experience. Courtships in the past could end in breakups, with men and women feeling and experiencing unrequited love. Men and women could be and often were betrayed. As such, the experience of rejection is not new. But it takes today the character of a significant segment in the lives of many and has practically become an inevitable part of the sexual and romantic lives of many if not most. White supremacy, for example, is not only a reaction to immigration but also to transformations of relationships between the sexes.

The female counterparts to male incels are "the housewives of white supremacy,"¹⁰ who reject both the sexual objectification of women and sexual freedom and reclaim traditional gender roles and family values. Their rejection of sexual freedom and equality plays an important, if less visible and less discussed, part in the phenomenon of white supremacy.¹¹ Indeed, scopio capitalism creates new forms of sexual inequalities between those endowed with sexual capital and those without, new forms of uncertainties, and new forms of devaluation, mostly of women, all of which send ripple effects in the social bond. Because the sexualization of female identity has not been accompanied by a genuine redistribution of social and economic power and because it has in a way reinforced men's sexual power over women, it makes traditional patriarchy attractive. In using the idiom of freedom scopio capitalism has deepened the modes of domination of women, rendering freedom a social experience that generates unease and even generates reactive responses in the form of backlash to feminism. Freedom has both made more widespread and more legitimate experiences of uncertainty, devaluation, and worthlessness.

The kind of philosophical sociological analysis deployed in this book is not about hammering down some clear normative principles. Rather its aim is to look for the ambiguities and contradictions embedded in practices. These ambiguities are the most difficult aspects of our experience, which are often unspeakable and hard to make explicit; it is the task of sociology to uncover and discuss them with the help of philosophy. Commenting on Axel Honneth's work, the philosopher Joel Anderson exposes one of Honneth's essential ideas to analyze social phenomena around the idea of a "semantischer Überschuss,"

a semantic excess, which is a "surplus" of meaning and significance that goes beyond what we can now fully capture, appreciate and articulate. [...] It is within our inebriate feelings, and at the margins of traditions, and more generally in the encounter with the conflicted and the unresolved that the needed innovative resources for Critical Theory are to be found.¹²

Contemporary Freedom produces such zones of ambiguity in the various forms of experiences of uncertainty described in this book. These experiences come to self-understanding through a deliberate work of clarification. It is such work of clarification this book has hoped to achieve, by withholding the knee-jerk endorsement or condemnation of freedom, by refusing to use a psychological vocabulary of empowerment or trauma to clarify the nature of these experiences. This book has been an effort to counter the epistemic imperialism of psychology in the emotional realm. Sociology, no less than psychology, has much to contribute to the clarification of the baffling experiences that make-up our private lives. In fact, sociology might be even better equipped than psychology in understanding the traps, impasses, and contradictions of modern subjectivity.

One question asked by idealist philosophy was how the subject was able to create unity from a variety of sensations and impressions that come from the outside world. The subject is that which forms a unity between disparate forces that enter consciousness. Hegel further developed this insight: In the process of aiming at unity, the self produces a set of oppositions, conflicts, contradictions, internal splitting, and dissociations, which he called "negations."¹³ The self as a unity emerges from this work of negation in the capacity to negate negations. To quote Robert Pippin on Hegel: Consciousness is "always resolving its own conceptual activity; and in a way that means it can be said both to be self-affirming, issuing in judgments and imperatives, but also potentially 'self-negating' aware that what it resolves to be the case might not be the case."¹⁴

In Hegel's view then, contradiction is productive and positive as it enables to generate a new entity. Contradictions, for example, intrinsic to the process of recognition, and recognition manages to overcome the contradictions inherent in consciousness.

However, the sexual-economic subject documented in this book creates splits and negations, which are not "sublated" into a larger coherent whole and into a process of recognition. Its contradictions remain negativities, unresolved contradictions and splits. The internal splits are between sexuality and emotions, between masculine and feminine identities, the need for

recognition and the need for autonomy, feminist equality and a selfhood regulated by a visibility that is produced by capitalist industries controlled by men. All these contradictions result from the subsumption of selfhood under a sexuality organized within and governed by the structures and procedures of scopophilic capitalism; and they often remain just that: contradictions that cannot be overcome or sublated, negations that turn into negativities.

In a social setting then, where the subject is busy managing such unsolvable contradictions, recognition—the process of overcoming intersubjective negation—cannot take place. This in a way is also Naomi Wolf's diagnosis in her now-classic study of beauty: "[E]motionally unstable relationships, high divorce rates, and a large population cast out into the sexual marketplace are good for business in a consumer economy. Beauty pornography is intent on making modern sex brutal and boring and only as deep as a mirror's mercury, anti-erotic for both men and women."¹⁵

The market—as an institution of freedom—throws the individual squarely in a consumer-technological path, which both rationalizes conduct and creates a nagging uncertainty about rules of interactions, about the nature of interactions, and about one's own and another's value. This uncertainty is in turn translated into further emotional commodities, provided by the infinite market of commodities supposed to help one achieve a more optimal self-relationships.

Some will ask, undoubtedly, whether this book perhaps overstates the case and confuses bleakness with healthy lucidity. After all, that romance has changed its form does not make it less present in our lives. And that freedom entails risks and uncertainty does not make it less worthwhile—nor does it alter the fact that most of us still live or long for stable couplehood. One may even invoke the reassuring statistics that one in three marriages today occurs through an Internet site,¹⁶ which would seem to suggest that technology-cum-the market is far from being the ominous phenomenon that this book has described.

But these arguments make the discrete events of "marriage" or "couplehood" into the only relevant units of analysis and fail to understand how the very nature of the romantic and sexual experience before, during, and outside marriage has changed. Thus, this book is not—in no way—an anxious interrogation about the future of marriage or stable relationships and a plea against casual sex, although it can undoubtedly be read this way. In its flamboyant and jubilatory forms, casual sex is a source of self-affirmation and self-expression. My focus has not been for or against casual sex or for or

against long-term commitments. I have described the various ways in which the appropriation of the sexual body by scopoc capitalism transforms the self, the feeling of self-worth, and the rules to form relationships. This new form of capitalism, so I argued, changes the ecology of intimate relationships, transforms the subjection of women, and creates a vast amount of experiences of rejection, hurt, disappointment—"unloving"—recycled through the vast economic and cultural machine of psychotherapy in all its forms. This is not its only effect but it is a very significant one.

Whether Marxist or functionalist, most approaches to society presume that society equips individuals with the tools to be competent members of it. The kind of critique advocated in this book parts company with such views and rejoins Freud's sociological critique in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In that famous book he argued that civilization had exacted too high a price from the individual in terms of demanding the repression of libidinal instincts and making guilt too central in the psychic economy of the modern subject.¹⁷ *Civilization and Its Discontents* thus suggested that modernity was characterized by a lack of fit between the individual psychic structure and the social demands put on it. Freud thus offered an interesting type of critique: not one that started from a clear normative view but one that inquired about the fit between social and psychic structures. In a similar vein, I have argued that scopoc capitalism exacts too high a psychic price from sexual and romantic actors and is at odds with the goals and ideals of contemporary actors. It is too high, because the inner life is too complex to be managed on one's own, mostly through self-scrutiny and through self-generated desires. It is too demanding, because sexual markets are competitive and create inevitable exclusions and social experiences of sexual humiliation.

If introspection and the self are not reliable sources of commitment and clarity, freedom alone cannot generate sociality and exacts a very high psychic price from social actors. In order to generate social solidarity, what Honneth usefully calls social freedom, freedom needs rituals. Rituals create a common emotional focus that does not require introspection or the permanent self-generation and self-monitoring of desires. Yet these rituals of sociality have largely disappeared and been replaced by uncertainty, which in turn requires a massive psychological self-management, meaning a deep transformation of desire that is no longer defined in "therapeutic" terms or through its capacity to transcend the social order. Sex and love no longer represent the site where the self can oppose society. Sexuality and intimacy have become the arena par excellence where the economic self is performed,

and can no longer be a source of creative tension between the individual and society. As Irving Howe put it:

In every totalitarian society, there is and must be a deep clash between state and family, simply because the state demands complete loyalty from each person and comes to regard the family as a major competitor for that loyalty. [...] For both political and nonpolitical people, the family becomes the last refuge for humane values. Thereby the defense of the "conservative" institution of the family becomes under totalitarianism a profoundly subversive act.¹⁸

Howe referred to totalitarian societies but was oblivious the surreptitious ways in which our own society—its economy and its politics—has also thoroughly penetrated the family, sexuality, and love that can no longer play the role of "last refuge for humane values." Sexuality and love are now the terrain par excellence to reproduce consumer capitalism and hone the skills of self-reliance and autonomy demanded and practiced everywhere. In his book *L'homme sans gravité* (2005), French psychoanalyst Charles Melman claims that contemporary societies have moved from desire to jouissance, where desire is regulated by scarcity and prohibition, while jouissance is about an unrestricted need to find an immediate satisfaction in objects that exist in abundance. Jouissance then is the true mode of desire of a consumer society, in which objects, affects, and sexual satisfaction displace the moral center of the self. But jouissance cannot properly find or constitute objects of interactions, love, and solidarity.

This book does not call for a return to family values, to community, or to a reduction of freedom. It does however take seriously feminist and religious critiques of sexual freedom and claims that freedom has let the tentacular power of scopoc capitalism dominate our field of action and imagination, with the assistance of psychological industries to help manage the many emotional and psychic breaches it creates. If freedom is to mean anything, surely it must include the knowledge of the invisible forces that bind and blind us.