

Eva Illouz
Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation
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Eva Illouz's *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* details the tribulations of heterosexual partnership in the modern era. Specifically, she argues for a greater focus on the social foundations of painful love relations. Illouz writes that her decision to undertake this work was influenced by her consistent encounter with Western women "[b]affled by the elusiveness of men" (vii). Recognizing the sociological tradition of addressing suffering, Illouz seeks to attend to suffering in love, positing that understanding one's ills can provide at least a partial antidote. In other words, Illouz's aim is to "ease the aching" (238) of modern love. However, in her work, Illouz argues for setting aside feminist analysis; she also focuses on only a very narrow subgroup of women. These aspects risk undermining her endeavor to alleviate the pains of love, as major critical gaps emerge.

Illouz draws on a unique archive, moving among readings of authors such as Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, and Emily Brontë, analyses of romance columns and self-help books, and examinations of her own qualitative interviews with men and women. Rather than providing a feminist critique of the representation of love and romance in these texts, Illouz instead uses them to create a narrative about the state of affairs of premodern and modern love. For Illouz, these texts are not problematic objects in themselves; rather, they are useful artifacts through which to gain a snapshot of the changing social dynamics of love. They are "cultural testimonies" (22). This methodological approach connects with Illouz's overall attempt to uncover the root causes, rather than simply treating the symptoms, of inequality in love relations between men and women. Illouz's ability to uncover these root causes is stymied, however, by swift dismissal of feminist critique. Though she engages with feminist dialogues on love such as the one offered by Shulamith Firestone (1970), she charges these with pathologizing men's behavior (70). As such Illouz misses the broader structural critiques these theorists have to offer, as well as the diversity of ideas emerging from feminist theorists on love, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Brownmiller, with whom she engages only very briefly (Beauvoir 1949/1988; Brownmiller 1976).

Illouz returns to several key themes throughout her work: the specifically modern shape of love, therapeutic models of understanding, and feminist critiques of love. Illouz discusses at length how modernity has brought about new love and relationship dynamics, and in particular the new technologies for forming relationships that exist

in the contemporary world. Illouz argues that premodern love involved what she terms "a *regime of performativity of emotions*" (30, italics in original), where certain ritualized processes of courtship helped to induce particular emotions. Illouz contrasts premodern love with modern love as "a *regime of emotional authenticity*" (31, italics in original) whereby an intensive self-reflexivity is encouraged, such that individuals attend to their feelings first and foremost as the catalyst for romantic encounters. This approach has helped to cement the idea that there are internal and authentic psychological states that precede social dynamics. In other words, there is a kind of psychological essentialism that occurs as a result of the modern understanding of love. Alongside a modern understanding of love, a therapeutic turn has occurred in which the pains of love are understood as treated through individual self-reflection. Love has lost its magic, with explanations now offered in terms of chemicals and brain activity (167).

In explaining the modern dynamics of love, Illouz proposes an understanding of the economics of sexuality currently operating, in the place of appeals to psychological theories. The socially accepted ability of men to choose much younger female partners than themselves results in an unfortunate economic equation: more choice equals more power to choose, and therefore less commitment (78). Illouz includes a number of fascinating interviews with men (and some women). One man, Daniel, describes feeling "raped" by a pet name given to him by a girlfriend, stating, "I told her immediately that I could not stand being called this way. I told her I could not be with her" (81). Illouz uses Daniel's narrative to exemplify the ease with which men can leave and change partners, given the wide field of choice available to them. According to Illouz, the backlash to this lack of gender equality in sexual markets has resulted in women then attempting to create a sense of scarcity, becoming sexually unrestrained to imitate men in order to even the playing field. Whereas in the nineteenth century men were expected to court and to be forthcoming with their emotions, men today--despite being the greatest beneficiaries of marriage in terms of domestic labor--are expected to have commitment issues (68). Illouz seeks to sidestep the dominant explanations for this transformation, as offered by evolutionary, psychological, and feminist perspectives, which she argues pathologize men's behavior. Instead she argues that norms of masculinity have shifted, such that men do not gain power via control of the family (largely a female responsibility now), but rather, through their sexuality.

Whereas women seek a male partner in order to marry, Illouz indicates that men seek many sexual partners, which creates an imbalance between the sexes. For Illouz, this asymmetricality is not a result of inherent traits, but rather of the social-material conditions whereby women are expected to agonize over their "biological clock," while men are free to re-partner throughout their lives. Men, it seems, keep searching (85). There is also an imbalance in recognition in love. Fewer men willing to commit means that those who do are in high demand, and thus can expect to be desired. Women, however, demand commitment, in order to secure the desire that is in short supply for them (132). In this fraught and uneven sexual field, psychological perspectives have emphasized introspection as the key to healing and avoiding love's harms. Yet, Illouz argues, this emphasis simply contributes to greater pain, as the self is inevitably socially constituted and thus fuzzy, and that gathering too much information before embarking on a choice merely complicates the choosing process (93). This situation creates a new kind of false consciousness, where one takes on a

burden of self-blame for failure in love, which is dictated not by the individual but by wider social dynamics.

Illouz also argues that in the modern world there has been a turn away from beauty toward an emphasis on sexiness. Along with consumer culture's and psychology's focus on sexuality, Illouz contends that feminism has contributed in no small part to this attention to sexiness, by advocating for sexual liberation. Inadvertently, sexiness, or "erotic capital" (56), has become a way to move vertically through social rankings. Here beauty and sexiness are seen as only "loosely" (54) connected with class, facilitating some social mobility across class groups. This focus on beauty and sexiness has resulted in a new kind of economy of desire, such that "desire takes on the properties of economic exchange" (58).

Illouz carefully distances herself from what she identifies as historical feminist approaches to love. Illouz argues that feminist perspectives too often presume that power differentials between men and women under patriarchy are the best way to understand love. Yet, she argues, looking to patriarchy fails to fully explain the phenomenon of love and both women's and men's attachments to romantic ideals. Expectations, particularly as raised in popular culture, play a key role in creating disappointment, and thus suffering in love (215). Illouz states that in this work she puts aside her "obvious allegiance to feminism" (170). In doing so, she echoes the work of queer theorist Janet Halley, who argues for "taking a break" from feminism, to ascertain its costs and benefits (Halley 2006). Like Halley, Illouz emphasizes the unintended costs inflicted by feminist approaches, which have often seen love in terms of problems of power and women's subordination (171). She argues that the framework of feminism has emphasized the paradigm of equality, to love's detriment, arguing that in the history of love relations, an imbalance of power across genders has been of key importance to passion (187).

The feminist emphasis on equivalence has eliminated the spontaneity of love past, where marriage pairings were based on little information aside from pragmatic interests (178). Feminism has emerged as a rationalizing force, along with scientific paradigms and technologies of choice (such as dating websites and apps). According to this view, the demand for political correctness tends to "flatten body surfaces" (187). The problem here, Illouz suggests, is that there is a demand to eliminate the exciting dynamics of asymmetry in love, but the fundamental system of gender inequality remains intact (192).

Despite claiming to offer a "sociological explanation," Illouz weaves among discussions of sociological, philosophical, and multiple other theories. For example, Illouz challenges Plato's understanding of the commensurability of love and reason, suggesting that the rationalization of love in the modern era has interrupted the ability to experience passion (197). For the most part Illouz's interdisciplinary approach works, and makes for vibrant and interesting reading, as the content shifts among different paradigms, texts, and other sources. However, what this work gains in dynamism, it loses in rigor, and it would have been good to see some more consistent or in-depth analysis in places, to strengthen Illouz's case.

Illouz provides in her epilogue a number of qualifications regarding the possible gaps in her work. These are telling, because they make clear that there are several aspects

of the book that may be read in ways with which Illouz may not be entirely comfortable. In citing feminism as key to suffering in love, her book may be read as advocating against feminist analysis, though she is clear that she does not want to be read as anti-feminist. That her work could be taken up in multiple ways is concerning, given the critique of feminism that she provides, which gives little credit to the benefits of feminist perspectives that have already analyzed love.

She is adamant in stating that feminist achievements of the past have not shifted the desire for love, and indeed, women today are caught in a conundrum of gender relations. She writes, "[m]iddle-class heterosexual women are thus in the odd historical position of having never been so sovereign in terms of their body and emotions, and, yet, of being emotionally dominated by men in new and unprecedented ways" (239). Illouz appears to suggest that feminism has offered women a false promise of liberation; a new approach is needed to free women from the bind of independence/subjugation. This position problematically assumes that the feminist project has reached its necessary conclusion, and that women are "sovereign in terms of their body and emotions."

We are also reminded throughout Illouz's work that this examination of love is aimed specifically at heterosexual relations, a point that she establishes at the outset of the book. She argues that heterosexual pairings deny the historical importance of economics to partnership, quietly folding in the economic with the emotional. She states, "although this book is relevant to many women, it is obviously not relevant to all of them (certainly not to lesbians, women who are not interested in domesticity, married or unmarried, or in children)" (10). Illouz is clear that her concern is for heterosexual women who do seek the expected trappings of love: domestic life, a family.

We might wonder with whom this work resonates, given the narrowness within which the project is defined. What is not acknowledged overtly is that Illouz's project is concerned with modern love so far as this pertains to white women in the global North. The diverse experiences of love in other cultural contexts are not considered. When Illouz acknowledges her focus on middle-class women, there is an unstated gap: her argument rests on understanding the economics of love, as if this focus annihilates other differences. This is not to say that women of color in the global North or women in the global South would necessarily have a radically distinct experience, but rather, these possible specificities are not entertained.

Illouz's decision to focus on a particular subject overlooks the diversity of love dynamics to be found in society, instead overstating the hegemony of the specifically white, heterosexual experience. By focusing on this experience as the norm of modern love, she is inadvertently contributing to and overstating its power. Where Illouz does address nonheterosexual love, she does so to bolster her argument about the problems of equality, which appears highly reductive. Citing Maureen Dowd, Illouz uses an anecdote about a gay man's anxiety in the dating scene, as if to suggest that even in partnerships between people of the same sex, angst rather than pleasure prevails (193).

Illouz is clear that she does not think love as it was exercised in the Victorian era is a preferable model (239). However, it would be unsurprising for readers to come to this

view if they stopped before the epilogue. Illouz's concern that the modern era precludes one from the "full experience of passion" (240) also raises some alarm, as we wonder if such a thing could exist, and if so what this might look like. Illouz's emphases on passion and meaningful bonds, and warning against the alienation of contemporary sex and the economics of love, overlook alternative understandings of how and why women might also partake in new forms of sexual abandonment. For example, Illouz does not look to discussions on why some single women pursue multiple sexual partners and reject romantic love (see, for example, Wilkinson 2012).

Perhaps the biggest problem with Illouz's work is the manner in which she identifies the causes of love, but does not escape prescribing a treatment of the symptoms. She proposes small reforms to ameliorate suffering in love that involve understanding the dynamics of modern love, changing beliefs about modern masculinity, and shifting gendered expectations of commitment. However, her advocacy for "passion" presumes that such an orientation can exist within the very parameters of the social life she describes, rather than requiring a seismic shift. Here we see starkly the problem she faces: in overlooking the gains of the feminist movement in challenging love, she forfeits the ability to look to institutions such as the family, and to wider structures such as capitalism and patriarchy, in order to understand what really needs to change in order to stop the pains of love.

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