Chapter 15

Disruptive Relation(ship)s: Romantic Love as Critical Praxis

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ABSTRACT

Historically, Western culture has maintained lines of strict demarcation between what is deemed personal and social, often with one eschewed and the other privileged. Doing so risks cutting ourselves off from useful avenues of inquiry, reflection, and, ultimately, transformation. Romantic love represents an especially effective entry point into a critical examination of the personal and its relationship to the social. Interrogating the personal/social binary can serve to problematize romantic love and destabilize cultural mechanisms of self-construction, along with the various attending epistemologies employed to “naturalize” distinctions of numerous kinds. As a critical methodology, romantic love facilitates a shifting of perspective from either/or to both/and, a move that can open transformative possibilities even as it challenges cherished beliefs, complicates reductive thinking, and explodes inequitable hierarchies.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever a celebrity or politician’s infidelity makes the news, the entire sordid affair is attributed to “original sin,” to weakness of character, as witnessed quite prominently during the scandal involving Tiger Woods. Seldom, if ever, however, is anything said about the complex relationship in the West between sex and love, let alone about love itself. Yet, if love is “the creator’s greatest gift to humanity,” if “true love” is required in order for one to be “complete,” why, then, did Tiger “cheat” on his wife? And if all he wanted was to “play the field” and “sow his wild oats,” why did he get married in the first place? And why to a Swedish model?

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-495-6.ch015
Despite their amalgamation in the present milieu, romantic love is traditionally viewed as somehow apart from and above sexual desire. One of the dominating features of Western hegemonic logic is the creation and maintenance of binary oppositions that function to define and legitimize one in relation to (and at the expense of) the Other: male/female, straight/gay, civilized/uncivilized, Christian/heathen, white/non-white, capitalism/communism. Similarly, romantic love serves as a legitimizing agent of the status quo; rather than being viewed as an outcome of historical processes, romantic love is seen as something outside history and culture, a pure, “natural” force or state more akin to gravity than to any sort of ideological apparatus. Romantic love’s privileged status as something so universal as to be beyond question is greatly strengthened by its relegation to the personal side of the personal/social binary.

Theorists, feminists most prominently, have pointed out that sexuality has been, in a similar fashion, anchored to private spaces despite its near omnipresence in the public realm. Barred from “proper” public discussion, discourses about sexuality - and sexuality as discourse - are, as a result, more easily regulated and controlled in order to effectuate and perpetuate power structures that depend upon sexuality as an exclusionary tool. While I applaud these critical insights into sexuality and the private sphere, and readily recognize the importance of such work in helping to secure a more just and equitable future, I want here to broaden the scope of critique to encompass the personal without collapsing it into either the private or the social. I maintain that in the process of challenging divisions between private and public, we have a tendency to reinforce, inadvertently, bifurcations between personal and social, with the social privileged and the personal ignored, dismissed, or even denied.

Certainly, attempts to unmask the unspoken and frequently unseen ways in which powerful public discourses permeate the supposedly private world of the individual contribute much to liberatory politics and pedagogies. But what of the personal? Even well-meaning advocates for social justice often attach a seemingly obligatory “merely” to any reference to the personal. Please do not mistake me: I understand the need to critique the personal. As critical and cultural theorists have pointed out, power is most effectively operationalized through the insidious process of masking its origin and replacing history with nature, whereby the social, the contingent, and the ideological are made to seem natural or universal. Consequently, nonconformity and resistance are privatized and pathologized, with “blame” placed upon the individual rather than upon institutions or ideologies. As a teacher who strives to empower students through a liberatory pedagogy, I subscribe to a constructivist approach to education that emphasizes the dialogic and culturally contextualized nature of teaching, learning, self, and reality.

Still, I don’t want to toss the proverbial baby out with the bath water. To deny the personal risks eliminating the possibility of individual agency and transformation. However, to dichotomize the personal and the social is to fall prey to the same hermeneutical snare proffered by regimes of power that maintain the status quo through the deployment of binary oppositions (such as the private/public distinction).

Romantic love, I assert, represents an especially effective entry point into a critical examination of the personal and its relationship to the social, as well as, by extension, the often hidden ideologies and histories that construct and underpin our daily lives and identities. Learning to think critically involves the concomitant examination of the relationship between received knowledge and previously unknown perspectives and epistemologies, between habituated beliefs and practices and radically new and possibly frightening views and actions. As educators dedicated to progressive social change, we want our students to learn about the wider world and their places within it, and in so doing, to recognize and then analyze the multiplicity of connections between