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They Call It Love: The Politics of Emotional Life

by **Alva Gotsby**

Verso Books, 2023.

Could It Be Love Indeed?

“*Love Is Love.*”
(anonymous source)

Can economic discourse have something relevant to say about *Antony and Cleopatra*? Or about *Wuthering Heights*? Is there any economics of *Othello*? Can the mentioned discourse with its operational concepts (resource regimes, value-perspectives, interest-drive rationalization, costs, profit, etc.) offer a perspective that brings something new?

Love in its complexity (emotions, affects, etc.) and its consequences is a subversive phenomenon. The indication that “love hurts” (Eva Illouz 2012), i.e. that in love flickers of self-sabotage, indicates that there is a complicated and branched connection between love and self-interest. Is the intention of economic reflection, which places emotions within the framework of cooperative intersubjectivity, sufficient to include the mentioned subversive aspects of love (Robert H. Frank 1988)? In any case, the traditional duality between altruism and egoism (often found in economic considerations) has little to say about it. After all, can any economic theory talk about self-sabotage? In fact, love that also shows tragic dimensions challenges an economic theory that, let’s not forget, many times wanted to be “imperial”. But it should be said that despite the fact that we record relatively rare reflections in the domain of economic reflection, there are still very significant developments.

We note first that feminist-inspired economic argumentation (Nancy Folbre and Julie A. Nelson 2000) is strongly inclined to economic articulation, that is, it is interested in different aspects with clear economic dimensions. Thus, the articulation of care (more precisely, the scope of market or non-market determination) represents an exceptional subject. There are very elaborate conceptions that come from the syncretistically shaped heterodox tradition and that recommend the concept of “love capital” (Phillip Anthony O’Hara 2022), and talk about the transformation of the meaning of love in

neoliberalized capitalism with significant consequences. We can mention that we even know such reflections that remain within the framework of the mainstream, and on the basis of that present analytical conclusions, create an economic analysis of love (Jon Elster 1996). Some attempts despite acknowledging the “mysteriousness of love” do not hesitate to talk about love using known economic categories (“love as household commodity”, “joint production of love”) in the sense of “economics of love” (Martin Zelder 2009).

However, we present a book that moves on the reflexive level of political economy. The author tries to take into account different categories in which there is a flash of political-economic reflection, we are especially referring to the category of work, which is the main orientation of the book. The reader is confronted with the dynamics of love and work in late capitalism. Alva Gotsby’s book is about crucial questions: what our emotional life is like in “classical” and in neoliberal capitalism (with special attention to “reproductive labour”, “emotional labour”, “capitalist logic of feeling” and “emotional reproduction”), what kind of work and production of value it implies, what it means for certain particular groups (lesbians, queers, etc.), and what emancipatory changes are needed.

In this review the focus will be on two aspects. On the one hand, the *economic* dimension of the book and, on the other, the issue of love. Although one might have the impression that Gotsby’s book contains excellent micro-analyses in parts, the book is fundamentally flawed and particularly damaging. And this is surprising, insofar as one might agree with many of the seemingly radical assertions in the book, yet the framing of the problem proves to be wrong.

In medias res: Gotsby suggests “the work of caring for people is an essential but disavowed and devalued aspect of capitalist societies” (p. IX). This is a surprising statement in itself, since, whatever one thinks of capitalism, the remaining caring aspects of charity and philanthropic organizations, the partially still remaining caring dimensions of welfare states and religious-spiritual communities are very much there. Gotsby is therefore using a pantragic rhetoric, and in doing so she risks making her analysis less nuanced and complex. A more serious conceptual problem, however, is that throughout the book, caring and love are understood as work. In fact, she asks this question from the very first page of the book: “who was working to make you feel safe, loved, and supported?” (p. IX, cf. p. 11). This is problematic in two ways. *On the one hand, it ontologizes and over-dimensionalizes work*. This position is actually nonsense. If everything is production - then nothing is (Gotsby says that “to labour is to do something” p. XV). Even ancient Greek thinking makes a clear distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, for example. When we look at a beautiful landscape, when we recite a poem, when we pour out our soul to a friend, when we sing in community, when we make love ... all this is hardly production. Unless in the banal sense of creating something new. But this is an unscientific notion of production - a bad concept.

Even more seriously, Gotsby completely ignores the fact that in the feminist theories of love (see the feminist economic theory, Folbre and Nelson) there is a notion, a conceptual possibility that love is primarily caring or a robust concern (for a summary of these, see Bennett Helm 2021). It is hardly surprising to say that these thinkers are in no hurry to classify love as work, since that would hardly make sense. And they do so

not because they are naïve about the social dimensions of our emotional lives, but because love is essentially something that is not production or work. Giving gifts, spending quality time together, saying affirming words to the other, caressing the other, spending quality time together - is not production or work. It can be effort, but it is still not production or work. And even acts of service are not simply work or production, however much Gotsby tries to categorize each and every expression of love in this way. Gotsby even says: “this work is commonly known as ‘love’” (p. X). She probably thinks of herself as exposing ideological false consciousness. I would rather say that she herself is doing ideology, and a very misleading and harmful one at that. It is very sad to see Gotsby’s ideological system sucking everything into its arbitrary categorization system, from breastfeeding and childcare to nursing (p. XI), from “comforting a loved one or making small talk with a lonely relative” (p. XIII). To put it more bluntly: it is as if, in Gotsby’s worldview, genuine love, which is giving and yet expects nothing, does not exist. Unfortunately, Gotsby imagines love as a job for which something is in return, for which something in return can and should be expected - and in doing so, he betrays the very spirit of love. Unfortunately, she thinks that “the task of the Marxist feminist tradition is to make this work visible” (p. XII).

One reason for this may be that Gotsby’s perspective is embarrassingly narrow. He is only concerned with the analysis of capitalism and does not address the *non-capitalist* dimensions of love. Just to remind ourselves: there is Tamil or Provençal love poetry, Bhakti and Sufi and Quaker love communities, love expressed in the animal and plant kingdoms, love expressed in other branches of art, etc. And thousands of Hindus say that, for example, “Shiva is love”. But Gotsby only wants to expose love as capitalist production, unfortunately. Her book was written through a narrow keyhole, and this has serious consequences.

The writer of these lines has written several writings on love, one of which is available in English (Mark Losoncz 2024) - the thesis is light years away from Gotsby. Gotsby is at her most catastrophic when she gets into the “criticism” of “romantic ideals of love” (p. XX) and “ideologies of love” (p. 1) and “ideologies of romance” (p. 2, 9, 47, cf. 144). Gotsby even allows herself to talk about “supposedly infinite and unconditional ... love” (p. 9). However, in her better moments, he writes: “commodification in some cases implies the loss of the infinite character of love” (p. 24). Perhaps we will eventually agree that love is infinite?

Instead of ideological and simplistic statements, Gotsby could have taken into account the “crisis of love” (Illouz 2019) and the alternative possibilities.

Yet, the key question is what does it mean that the work is “devalued” and what would it mean to value (or valorize?) it? This is the most important issue here. *This is both an economic and love questions*. We will return to this question later.

By her own admission, Gotsby draws most heavily on Marxist feminism, theorists and movements (p. XVI), Silvia Federici and others who are engaged in political economy. But his sources are also very problematic (especially p. 46). Gilles Dauvé, the most important theoretician of communization theory, has written a work entitled “Federici versus Marx” (2016), in which he exposes the arbitrary concepts and analyses of Marxist feminism. The critique is extremely complex: for example, it has a historical dimension in which he shows that Federici’s one-sided focus on dispossession as a

negative condition. But more importantly, Dauvé shows that, although she poses as a Marxist feminist, Federici is in fact essentially disloyal to Marx's conception of the capitalist mode of production. I cannot go into the details now. The most important thing for this review of Gotsby is that Dauvé shows how inaccurately Federici's "Marxist feminism" uses the notions of production and reproduction. Dauvé's conclusion is very strict: "The very bedrock of Marxist feminism is a premise that is no way provable". What's it about? Let me quote Dauvé once again, in details: "[the Marxist feminist theory] extends the notion of surplus labour from the work-place to the home, a brief reminder might help. Marx argues that a wage-earner is paid the value of his labour-power, i.e. what its reproduction costs. ... We can call work whatever we want, yet the only work that reproduces capital is the one done for a company. ... Housework does not result in surplus-value, it does not generate a commodity sold on a market". Dauvé even claims: "female domestic work is not structurally indispensable to capital". What Dauvé says about Federici is completely analogous to what was said about Gotsby at the beginning of the article: "the meaning is lost. Lots of activities may currently be labelled 'social', yet not every reproductive act generates value. Federici, however, writes as if everything was exploitation, everything was work and everything created value. Well, not everything". Dauvé is even more convincing when he rails against the actually pseudo-Marxist slogan of "wages for housework" (Gotsby also speaks of "unwaged care of family and friends", p. 85, cf. p. 98, p. 116). The reader is also invited to delve into other details of Dauvé's article.

Worse still, unfortunately, Gotsby is not even familiar with Marxist feminism itself. Missing from the literature are the most significant Marxist and other feminist achievements of our time (e.g. Maria Mies 1986; Jane L. Collins and Martha E. Gimenez 1990; Lisa Vogel 2013; Tithy Bhattacharya 2017; Sara R. Farris 2017; Gimenez 2019; Susan Ferguson 2020; Ashley J. Bohrer 2020). The post-Marxist work (in the strict domain of political economy) Roswitha Scholz should be especially highlighted, because she is also a critic of Gotsby-type postmodernist pseudo-feminism (2000). Even more regrettable that Gotsby knows nothing about anarcho-feminism (e.g. Libcom 2024; The Anarchist Library 2024). We mention these perspectives not out of complete and total agreement with them, but simply because they are missing from the book: Gotsby's viewpoint is terribly, disappointingly poor.

But more disappointing than anything else, Gotsby cannot see beyond a simplistic, trivialised, vulgar Marxist feminism. Worth recommending to readers is, for example, Janet Saltzman-Chafetz's books (e.g. 1974, 1986, 1988). Even more embarrassing is the absence of Carol Gilligan's theory of women and caring (e.g. 1993). And why would that be important? Because Gotsby would finally see the big picture, not only capitalism from her narrow perspective, but also other historical perspectives, the enormously complex histories of women and men. And she would finally take into account both biological universals and flexibility. To put it simply, all the tendencies.

Again: why is this important? It is a paradox. While Gotsby criticizes "ontologizing effects" (p. 4), she herself is a doing re-ideologizing, a bad ontology. For her, everything is socially constructed (see, for instance, the expression "constructed as", p. 10. or children as being "constructed", p. 13, or women as "constructed", p. 79) and historical, nothing is natural (see e.g. the superficial "criticism" with regard to

naturalisation, p. 8, p. 16.) and/or eternal. We can't go into details now about how constructivism is flawed (see e.g. Paul Boghossian 2006). In any case, what Gatsby is doing is not really faithful to Marx or Marxism. It is a vulgar postmodernist ideology of constructivism. After this, we should not be surprised to find arbitrary and unsubstantiated sentences about the absence of "authentic self", "core identity" and "real self" (pp. 4-5). All significant spiritual traditions speak of Higher Selves, but Gatsby knows nothing about them (for a guide, an introduction, see Ken Wilber 1980). Contrary to what Gatsby writes in constructivist terms, the subject is not merely "the result of a historical process related to changes" (p. 5). It is also nonsensical when Gatsby talks about "modern dichotomies of body and mind". This claim is not even applicable to Descartes, the "Cartesian dualism" is a myth (see Jean-Luc Marion 2018).

Gatsby writes that "feelings ... are not spontaneous eruptions" (p. 2). From this sentence it is only clear that the author had no experience of what love at first sight is.

It is absurd when Gatsby writes, "in modernity, love has become what confirms the value of a person" (p. 11). Let's ignore the bad formulation for now, just ask the question: isn't the existence of the person affirmed by love even before modernity? And even in the animal kingdom, for example in gorillas?

Gatsby disparagingly writes that "motherhood is ... presented as emotionally unique experience" (p. 13). She even speaks in agreement of "refusing to be 'good' mothers" (p. 92). This vulgar postmodernist ideology (associated with the usual celebration of "difference", p. 119) is a quite astonishing throwback even to so-called second-wave feminism that threatens the potentiality of critical political economy. The theorists who are - superficially - usually classified as "postmodern" or "poststructuralist" have reflected a lot on motherhood, but never in such a dispassionate way. Even more scandalous is when, for Gatsby, even the "reproduction of gender difference" is problematic (p. XX, cf. p. 119, 125). We who think it's good to have men and women (too) see no problem with "reproduction", though of course we also like to play with post-conventional roles. Gatsby even ideologically interjects "the pleasures that people derive from heterosexuality and familial love"-be is (p. XXII, cf. 120-125). Gatsby uses such pseudo-radical discourse that at one point she describes the heterosexual relationship as the woman's relationship to the oppressor (p. 77). On the other hand, there is an important and venerable tradition of critique of the nuclear family, from Marx and Engels and beyond. However, Gatsby speaks naively and simply of the "abolition of nuclear family" (p. XIX, p. 106, 135). Of course, there is much to do about your family, but it can be thought through empathetically and responsibly in a way that is consistent with a critique of capitalism (see, for example, Gábor Máté and Gordon Neufeld 2004). Contrary to what Gatsby says (p. 21), the family can potentially be a kind of refuge in the midst of the suffering caused by capitalism.

It is not difficult to see behind these sentences the pseudo-radical feminism and queer theory (e.g. p. 57) and the bad, uncritical influence of the otherwise truly inspiring Judith Butler (on "transfeminism", which is by nature nonsense, see p. 127). The uncritical use of the word "gender" is not even mentioned here (for example, this could be recommended: peaktrans.org - Peak Trans 2024).

Gatsby writes directly that "sex is supposedly the most private activity" (p. 48). The author seems obsessed with deconstructing everything, even the intimacy of

lovemaking. Or simply lives in a community where there are only orgies. Who knows? Of course, it is understandable that she in fact implies that sexuality has a socio-economic dimension - but these formulations are very unfortunate.

Gatsby writes of working class unity (p. 52) as if it were not in political crisis, as if the era of the classical labour movement (c. 1871-1968) had not ended. This is vulgar Marxism of the outmoded *Arbeiterbewegung*.

Gatsby obviously cannot decide whether or not to have women or not. While in some places she criticises the “reproduction” of gender differences (p. XX) and calls for the “denaturalisation” of the female body (p. XV) (she even claims, in accordance with Federici, that “femininity is a work function”!, p. 56), in others she seems to know exactly what the female body is (e.g. p. XV). She even seems to know what the “key feminine tasks” are (p. 54). This conceptual chaos, of course, stems from a bad constructivist ontology that fails to clarify the relationship between nature/biology and culture/society. There are probably more readers who would like to see women continue to exist (both in their *natural* form).

No wonder Gatsby is totally confused about men, too. She does try to be nuanced at first (p. 58, 78). But she misses the basics. How men struggle with normative expectations about their identities. What kind of emotional “work” they do. How much higher percentage of them do dangerous, life-threatening work. How, in fact, men as fathers and husbands also do a huge amount of emotional “work” (Gatsby simplifies this in the following way: “men’s emotional deskilling”, pp. 69-70). That it is often women who manage family money, who make the decisions about financial issues. Rather than a nuanced approach, Gatsby trivialises that “women as a group are exploited by men as a group” (p. 59). Despite her best efforts, Gatsby ends up victimising women and depriving them of subjectivity - there is a drastic lack of real political-economic reflection that shows economic dynamics with political dimensions.

Gatsby even idealizes lesbianism at one point (pp. 102-104), which is absurd. Of course, lesbian relationships can also contain domination, exploitation, etc.

The way the author even raises the issue of “undoing pregnancy” (p. 125) is quite appalling. The neglect of pregnant women and mothers throughout our civilisation is scandalous. Fortunately, there are movements such as those for orgasmic childbirth that seek to transcend this (e.g. Elizabeth Davis and Debra Pascali-Bonaro 2010). Instead of real struggles, Gatsby irresponsibly talks about key issues. She is doing great damage.

Gatsby is part of a tradition that I also support: the refusal of work (see for example Losoncz 2013). But even here the author cannot be consistent. Sometimes she rejects work (p. 95), other times she writes that “fucking is work” (p. 102) or that love is work (e.g., p. 95).

Quite horrifyingly, she believes that family blood ties are akin to the Nazi ideology of *Blut und Boden* (p. 121).

In one place she is very honest, too honest: according to her, for “queer communism”, “the target of this perspective is nuclear families and white, binary hetero-gender” (p. 120). Gatsby thus declares war on our families.

Homology between love and work, that is, treating love from the perspective of work shows significant deficits. Gatsby, it seems, projects money in the context of love. Also for love, also for making love. The disappearance of women and men, of families.

As much sympathy we can have for some of her sub-views, instead, it is worth hoping that the hell she describes will never happen. Fortunately, it will not. For humanity is in that phase of development which some call turquoise and integrated, and in which “post-modern” has passed. Fortunately, much of love’s potential, economic as well, is still to be discovered.

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