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Intimate Citizenship: A Pragmatic, Yet Radical, Proposal for a Politics of Personal Life

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In *Love: An Unromantic Discussion*, Mary Evans offers a powerful demystification of contemporary western romantic love. An exercise in sociohistorical analysis and normative theorizing, the book explores the meanings of (primarily heterosexual) love at the start of the 21st century, and poses the question: 'Dare we entertain the idea of a world without love and could another vocabulary, in which words such as care, commitment and desire were more often used, actually make us happier?' (Evans, 2003: 2).

Her conclusion is to propose that 'we abandon love in its romanticized and commercialized form' and that '[r]ather than regarding the rational as the cold and uncaring enemy of love, we might well regard it as its only true defender in a social world awash with deadly cocktails of romance, hedonism and personal entitlement' (p. 143).

The argument for this rests on an analysis of what she regards as the societally destabilizing contemporary understanding of love 'in terms of romance, of sexual desire and above all of a lifelong entitlement to both experiences' (p. 123). The emergence of romantic love, the liberalization of sex and the availability of contraception have offered women greater choice within heterosexual relationships, but these same forces have increased the instability of these relationships, with negative consequences for both the individuals concerned and for their children – 'a chaos of generations whose needs for undemanding and unequivocal love have never been met, and who need to turn either to the market place for emotional satisfaction or to that apparently safe haven of single life' (p. 130). Love has been 'deconstructed' into sex and romance, and it has been removed 'from any close or necessary association with any form of social relationship' (p. 78). People expect more, she suggests, in the sphere of love, as they do in the spheres of paidwork and consumption, and this leads to relationship breakdown, with consequent 'cruelty and pain', 'losses and absences' (p. 135); and 'in expecting more', she suggests, 'we are perhaps gaining less' (p. 135). In particular, our obsession with our individual pursuit of romance and sex is turning us away from social engagement. Mary's answer to the problems caused by this particular sociohistorical construction of love is to advocate a return to the deployment of reason in the realm of personal life that was exemplified in the novels of Jane Austen. Austen was highly critical of the romantic, regarding superficial forms of attraction in love relationships as transient and insufficient as the basis of 'long termconjugal happiness' (p. 77). Instead she saw 'themutual power to reason' as the ground from which love could grow: 'The step forward whichAusten makes is to claim the rationality of women and to suggest that sexuality (and marriage) can be conducted in a way which allows both sexual desire and rationality' (p. 34). So, Mary argues, we should relinquish love in its current form – romantic and individualized, with its lack of long-term commitment to the couple – and we should engage rationality to promote a version of love which recognizes the limitations of romance, and understands that love requires work and application. Without seeking to defend the mode of love that Mary critiques, and without denying the psychic consequences of processes of individualization, and relationship breakdown in particular (for discussion of this, see Roseneil, 2007; Roseneil, forthcoming), I want to suggest an alternative agenda for feminists concerned with the politics and practices of personal life, one that does not share Mary's Enlightenment belief in the power of reason to overcome the vicissitudes of affective life. Drawing on the work of Ken Plummer (2003), I define this agenda as the project of 'intimate citizenship'. My proposal rests on both a different sociohistorical analysis of personal life fromMary's, pointing to new forms of relationality which are emerging in the early 21st century, and is predicated on different ontological assumptions about love and intimacy from Mary's work. While Mary clearly recognizes the gains of the women's liberation movement and the post-1960s liberalization of sexuality and is deeply concerned about the inequalities that still characterize heterosexual relationships, which differentiates her work from the 'patriarchal pessimists' (Roseneil, 2007) - Zygmunt Bauman (2001, 2003), Robert Putnam (2000) and Richard Sennett (1998) - she shares with them, and with feminist sociologists Arlie

Hochschild (2003) and Eva Illouz (2007), a critical lamentation about the demoralizing, anomic impact of the individualization and commercialization of the past three decades on love and intimacy, community and social bonds. My normative agenda is radically opposed to theirs, rejecting the implicit nostalgia for earlier ways of living and loving that is found, in varying ways, in the writings of these sociologists. There is, I would suggest, a pessimistic puritan sensibility in Mary's work – captured well in her description of the contemporary world as 'awash with deadly cocktails of romance, hedonism and personal entitlement' (p. 143). Yet there is also a modernist optimism at the heart of her proposal for rational love, a belief that if done correctly – rationally – if disentangled from romance, the pursuit of sexual pleasure and a sense of personal entitlement, love can be settled and secured, and need not be chaotic. I do not share this belief. First, in terms of the analysis of social change, I do not think that there is any possibility of turning the clock back on the multifarious transformations of culture, economics, law and social policy that, since the 1960s, have enabled women and men to exit in ever increasing numbers the modern Western European–North American heterosexual nuclear family. Mary and I are agreed that the conjugal couple is increasingly fragile, and we both see the normative grip of the sexual and gender order which has underpinned both the institutions of the couple and its related family formation to be weakening. But thereafter our analyses diverge. My recent research on the personal lives of people living outside the cohabiting couple – people who might be seen to be at the cutting edge of individualization – suggests that there is little desire among this diverse group (of heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men, single-and-never married, divorced, post-cohabitation and living apart-together) to settle into a(nother) cohabiting dyad. Where Mary sees people 'pursu[ing] "love" with unstinting enthusiasm' (p. 22), I see increasing scepticism about the romantically based sexual/love relationship.

Rather, I argue that a set of counter-heteronormative relationship practices is emerging among this increasingly large group of the population, in which sexual/love relationships are decentred, and friendship is prioritized, and which involve, for many, experimentations with non-conventional forms of sexual/love relationships (see Roseneil, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Roseneil, forthcoming; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). The research found that, across a range of lifestyles, ages and sexualities, friendship occupied a central place in people's personal lives, and operated as key value and site of ethical practice; people believed in the importance of friendship, both in principle and in their own particular friendships. There was a high degree of reliance on friends, as opposed to biological kin and sexual partners, particularly for the provision of care and support in everyday life. Most of the people interviewed were enmeshed in complex and relatively stable networks of friendship, through which they had strong commitments and connections to others. In this context, sexual/love relationships were rarely seen as the primary, and never the exclusive, space of intimacy, and there was little evidence of a teleological assumption of, or orientation towards, settled, cohabiting coupledom within the sexual/love relationships in which people were engaged. Rather these intimacies were described instead as being about the construction of mutual pleasure in the present. On this basis, I would suggest that the heteronormative couplets of love and romance, romance and sex, coupledom and sex, coupledom and cohabitation are being destabilized, as people articulate the love they have for their friends, the sexual relationships they value that are outside the romantic couple form and the partnerships in which they live that involve separate homes. These new forms of personal life pose a significant challenge to the dominant regimes of gender and sexuality, and in this sense can be seen as societally destabilizing, but they do not necessarily mean that people are becoming less socially engaged, as Mary suggests. On the contrary, the decline in emphasis on the cohabiting couple, and the increasing importance of friendship to the growing portion of the population who are living outside conventional families, might well be seen as heralding new forms of sociality and sociability, rather than signalling the demise of community and social bonds. In sum, I would argue that these complex social transformations should not be viewed as negatively as Mary and many sociologists do, and, because they are rooted in long-term processes

of social, cultural and economic change, they cannot be undone by a decision to embrace a new form of rational heterosexual love. In addition, ontologically I do not believe that love can be remade in the way in which Mary proposes. A psychoanalytic perspective on love rejects the assumption that we might ever be entirely rational, conscious and volitional in our love relationships, and suggests instead the importance of unconscious processes which mean that we do not totally know and understand ourselves and our actions, that we are mysterious to ourselves and others (Bollas, 1999), that our personhood is not unitary and that internal conflict, being divided within ourselves, is an unavoidable dimension of being human. Psychoanalysis suggests that human subjectivity and relations are characterized by ambivalence, by the struggle between love and hate, destructive and reparative impulses, and that aggression, envy and guilt are unavoidable dimensions of the human condition. As Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips have argued recently, 'the great achievement of psychoanalysis [is] its attempt to account for our inability to love others, and ourselves. The promises of adaptive balance and sexual maturity undoubtedly explain the appeal of psychoanalysis as therapy, but its greatness may lie in its insistence on a human destructiveness resistant to any therapeutic endeavours whatsoever' (Bersani and Phillips, 2008: 60). So, while Freud's famous dictum 'Wo Es war, soll Ich werden' (Where id was, shall ego be) suggests the psychoanalytic therapeutic project of displacing the unruly, disorderly, instinctual (Es/id) aspects of the psyche, in favour of the development of the rational self (Ich/ego), psychoanalytic theory and practice attest to the ultimate impossibility of the final achievement of this task. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Mary's condemnation of 'a social world awash with deadly cocktails of romance, hedonism and personal entitlement' reads like a condemnation of human nature, of that from which we cannot escape by rational, self-reflexive fiat or political decision-making. 'Romance' – the expression of the human desire for attachment and sexual union with another; 'hedonism' – the expression of the pleasure principle, our attraction to pleasurable experiences; and 'personal entitlement' – the assertion of the self, of the ego, and its defence against the forces which impinge upon it and threaten it, the expression of the self-preservative instinct – are all part of what makes us human. This is not to say that the cultural forms taken by the desire for attachment and sexual union, by pleasure and by self-preservation do not change historically in important ways, and don't vary cross-culturally, and it is not to deny that commercialization and individualization have wrought significant changes in how we live these aspects of our humanity. But Mary's call to defend ourselves against romance, hedonism and personal entitlement seems to me to amount to a call for us to be less alive, less fully human, and is destined to fail. We should, as Bersani and Phillips (2008: 98) argue, 'wish for more life rather than less'. Rather than abandoning sexuality, pleasure and self-preservation, and seeking to replace them with rational love, 'care, commitment and desire' (Evans, p. 2) – as if care, commitment and desire were unconflictual and unconflicted practices, my proposal is that we should abandon our collective, public and political investments in the life-long, monogamous couple, as the source of our hopes and expectations of social stability, relational continuity and personal companionship. This proposal is based on an acknowledgement of recent transformations in personal life, a queer feminist analysis of the ways in which these changes constitute a significant shift in the heteronormative social order and a psychoanalytic perspective on the inevitability of instability, disorder and disruption within sexual/love relationships. Instead of seeking to remake love as a rational enterprise, in order to resettle the couple form, it would be better to develop a political agenda that seeks to minimize the harm our unruly psyches and changing relationships inflict upon our selves and others. This project would aim to promote the freedom and ability to construct and live selfhood and a wide range of close relationships – sexual/love relationships, friendships, parental and kin relations – safely, securely and according to personal choice, in their dynamic, changing forms, with respect, recognition and support from state and civil society. Such a politics of intimate citizenship would offer, I suggest, a pragmatic yet radical agenda for feminism in the early 21st century.

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