
 Book Review

Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz What Is Sexual Capital?

Polity Press, 2022, 144 pp.

Eva Illouz is a French Israeli sociologist famous for her continuous work exploring the nature of sexuality and love in modern times, particularly in her awarded books *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* and *Why Love Hurts*. Recently, she partnered up with Israeli sociologist Dana Kaplan to explore the effects that neoliberalism has on sexuality and vice versa through the phenomenon of neoliberal sexual capital defined as the ability to gather self-appreciation from sexual encounters and then use it to enhance employability. Whereas it was previously thought that sexuality and economy were unrelated, sociologists today attempt to explain how social agents use sexual experiences to their advantage, be it in economic markets, in marriage markets, or further sexual encounters. Illouz and Kaplan take that logic a step further in an attempt to connect the concept to class and gender relations and shed some light on the way their interplay allows for specific kinds of inequalities to exist.

The book is divided into five chapters, where the introductory chapter briefly announces the authors' concept of sexual capital emphasizing the particularities of their theoretical position in contrast with other contemporary sociological views on sexual capital such as that of Catherine Hakim or Nancy Fraser. The second chap-

ter deals with the interplay between sexuality and freedom, especially in the context of capitalism. The third chapter deals with defining both sex and capital in order to define their amalgamate, sexual capital, whose typology will then be explored in the subsequent fourth chapter culminating in contemporary neoliberal sexual capital. The final chapter reflects on the theory of neoliberal sexual capital offered in the book, emphasizing that it functions as a form of social currency available only to particular, mostly middle-class, individuals who then exploit themselves in order to gain or keep employment.

Their first theoretical move involves recognizing the *a priori* social quality of sexuality marking a transition from sexuality shaped by religion to sexuality shaped by the economy. As the importance of race and religion waned, partner choice was no longer dependent exclusively on social-economic standing. It also became dependent on sexual desirability and psychological compatibility, as it remains to this day. At the same time, the era of mass-produced commodities was replaced by unique, tailor-made options indicative of the neoliberal singularity. That singularity is followed by "an increased responsabilization of the individual" (19) that has found himself in an ever more deregulated market. So, for this immensely responsible neoliberal individual to be a functioning element of the market, he or she needs to mobilize the entirety of his existence, including his sexuality. This directly implies that subjective experiences and psychological states have a notable effect on employability and class reproduction. Not only that, but they also play an important role in strategies of social mobility, as well as in ways of defining oneself in the workplace.

The authors then develop a typology of four different forms of sexual capital. The first is sexual capital by default referring mainly to chastity and domesticity that made women attractive in the marriage market as it marked the transformation of a moral value into an economic asset. The second type is sexual capital as added value of the physical body referring to its capacity to become a commodity resulting in monetization as it does in sex work. The third type is embodied sexual capital referring to the fact that sex sells both inside and outside of the sex industry, including becoming a key factor in “selling yourself” on the “relationship market”. Finally, the authors define the fourth and last titular type, neoliberal sexual capital as the sum of individually accumulated feelings of social competence and self-worth that stem from sexual experiences. The concept goes beyond sexiness as something that can, especially for women, improve their prospects at the workplace and instead focuses on various subjective sexual experiences that become useful in the labor market and have extensive implications for employability. Sex can increase self-esteem and self-confidence and facilitate social competence, it can give one a sense of domination over another, and it can lead to greater job satisfaction because it improves mood. In other words, the self-worth and social competence gained through sex can be turned into economic capital.

Since the neoliberal subject needs to exploit the totality of his or her self in order to compete on the market, he or she then acts as a self-entrepreneur working diligently on improving his or her employability. The authors then conclude that “singularity is now a mode of production

while self-identities have become means of production” (98). This economization of the subject becomes complete when it reaches sexuality that is now no longer a private path to our true self, but has rather become objectified as a commodity in the form of “improvable skills and techniques, modes of personal communication, paths to well-being, and as evidence of creativity, experience, and performable singularity” (98). It comes as no surprise that, in contemporary culture, sex then epitomizes freedom, self-realization, and empowerment, the very same ideals of contemporary capitalism. This points to the tragic failure of our supposed newly found freedom. While we are now largely free of the influence of religion repressing and/or controlling our sexuality, as well as the constraints of biology that psychoanalysis did away with by showing sexuality is far more than just insatiable instinct, we are still trapped by the public and performative demand of the market, continuously forced to perform, showing all aspects of ourselves, all of the time. This new form of capital also results in different modes of inequality. The authors mention that this transformation of sexual capital to economic capital is reserved for the middle class who the authors consider more likely than others to derive self-esteem from their sexual lives. Here their use of neoliberal sexual capital resulted from “habitation instilled by class dispositions” (103). In this respect, “neoliberal sexual capital is part of the class structure precisely because it is accumulated by individuals in their everyday intimate lives”, especially because “aesthetic codes of sexiness and even of sexual know-how are gendered and classed” (107).

Apart from this explanation being somewhat vague, this begs the question of how the authors define the middle-class, which is one of the weaker aspects of their thesis. At no point is the middle-class directly defined, other than referring to “those engaged in cultural and creative labor” (106). It is questionable if cultural and creative labor belongs exclusively or even predominantly to the middle class, and it seems as though the authors perceive the middle-class as a very uniform group, while further inspection may discover that an influencer and a high school teacher might not be able to equally benefit from sexual capital because their occupational fields and the demands that follow from them vary greatly.

The book suffers from another important deficit and that is the lack of attention it pays to empirical evidence. While the authors do include some theoretical and anecdotal evidence to support their claims, they do not engage with sufficient empirical data that could lend further support to their arguments. This could have been remedied by including or conducting research on the prevalence of sexual capital in different contexts, as well as its implications for gender roles, sexual orientation, and power dynamics.

Furthermore, while the authors suggest that it is sexual capital that, at least for some, results in an increase in self-confidence or social skills, they do not question the possibility of the process going in the other direction so that an increase in self-confidence results in a higher sexual capital. Furthermore, is it possible that there are attributes that increase both sexual capital and confidence and ultimately employability? While the authors successfully

identify the importance of sex, they never establish what makes sex a special activity or experience different from all other activities that also result in skills transferable to the marketplace? In the same sense, participating in adrenaline sports or exotic traveling or survival camping can also result in skills transferable to the market. This leads to the main inadequacy of their theory, and that is it fails to answer the question how is the fact that neoliberalism coopts the sexual sphere different than all the other ways neoliberalism coopts all other aspects of our existence. While their concept of sexual capital depicts the neoliberal need for control and speaks to the failures of the sexual revolution, it seems that they forget its disruptive potential. The thing about sexuality is that it can and does open up space for surprises, both positive and negative. It can create anxiety as well as lead to a loss of control and a sense of vulnerability inherently problematic for the neoliberal order. It can also, for some, lead to a decentralization of the subject that can be evidenced in a relatively minor negative change in self-confidence or as something that fundamentally shakes our own identity and forces us to reconsider our place in the world.

Despite these weaknesses, the book offers an innovative and comprehensive exploration of the concept of sexual capital and successfully presents a new radical political economy of sex that “challenges the prevalent view that sex is a private matter, that has no bearing on how the social space is organized” (105). The authors show that the sexual sphere can no longer be seen as merely auxiliary to the sphere of production, but as almost indistinguishable from it. They also make a compelling argument

for the need to address the power dynamics of sexual capital in order to create a more equitable and just society. In conclusion, the book provides an excellent grounding for research, both theoretical and empirical, about sexual capital.

Jelena Krpan
Faculty of Political Sciences,
University of Zagreb

Book Review

Mark A. Wolfgram
Antigone's Ghosts: The Long
Legacy of War and Genocide
in Five Countries

Bucknell University Press, 2019, 304 pp.

In *Antigone's Ghosts* Mark Wolfgram offers that without a correct accounting for the past's violence, the ability to mourn and metaphorically bury the dead, societies that have suffered events of mass violence and genocide will remain divided; the wounds of the past will fester, infecting the present through unreconciled interpretations of history. Like in the play *Antigone*, our inability to agree on what to do about the dead will lead to further tragedy. The main contribution of the book is the comparative framework the author identifies and details in the introduction. It is through this framework that we can account for how each of the countries ex-

plored in the book has dealt with its genocidal past. These countries are: Germany, Spain, Japan, Yugoslavia, and Turkey.

The first piece of the framework are psychological and social-psychological processes. Here, the author identifies 'the ethnocentrism of death' and the 'externalization of blame' as phenomena that afflict and distort the remembering of every society. The first involves nearly every group's proclivity to see itself as the victim or to emphasize their victimhood, thereby ignoring or minimizing other victims, including their own. The best example of this is seen in post-war Germany, both East and West, when the narrative focused on German victims of Fascism, subsuming and ignoring the victims of the Holocaust. Moreover, the author details the way in which German society was largely able to overcome these social-psychological barriers and begin coming to terms with its own past and its victims.

'The externalization of blame' is a society's ability to look outside in order to account for the perpetration of mass violence or genocide. External factors can range from other agents, to forces of nature, to fate that account for the occurrence of atrocities. The book's primary contribution is how it explores these phenomena in conjunction with a country's culture, political system, internal politics, and international relations. For example, the author finds that a society is more committed to 'the externalization of blame' if it has a more collectivist culture than an individualistic one.

I will focus on the chapter where this framework is used to explore contested memories of the Second World War and *Goli Otok* in Yugoslavia. In a comparative