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Intimacy and Modernity : Modernization of Love in the Western Culture

Studia Europaea Gnesnensia 7, 157-168

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

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**INTIMACY AND MODERNITY.
MODERNIZATION OF LOVE IN THE WESTERN CULTURE¹**

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to confront two different accounts of contemporary transformations of intimacy. The first account, represented mainly by Anthony Giddens and Brian McNair, concentrates on processes of democratization and emancipation; simply speaking, this approach suggests that modern intimacy contains higher amount of freedom than the pre-modern one. The second account emphasizes significance of processes of commercialization and rationalization of intimacy; according to this approach intimacy becomes more and more dependent to the capitalistic market. This point of view is represented by social scientists like Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Eva Illouz and Arlie Russell Hochschild. The aim of the article is to analyze abovementioned accounts not as opposite, but as complementary perspectives, which enables to notice highly ambivalent character of modernization of intimacy and modernization in general.

Keywords

intimacy, pure relationship, commercialization, colonization, rationalization, modernization

¹This article was funded by the Polish National Science Centre on the basis of a decision number DEC-2012/05/N/HS1/03338.

This paper's aim is to confront two highly differentiated accounts of modern intimacy. The first account, represented mainly by Anthony Giddens and Brian McNair, concentrates on the processes of democratization and emancipation; simply speaking, this approach suggests that modern intimacy contains higher amount of freedom than the pre-modern one. This account will be called "liberation thesis approach" within this article. In turn, the second account emphasizes significance of processes of commercialization and rationalization of intimacy; according to this approach intimacy becomes more and more dependent on the capitalistic market. This point of view is represented by social scientists such as Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Eva Illouz and Arlie Russell Hochschild. In further considerations this account will be referred as "colonization thesis approach". This article attempts to compare above-mentioned accounts and explain the connections between them. To put it another way, the aim of this article is to analyze the relations between democratization and emancipation of intimacy on the one hand and commercialization and rationalization of intimacy on the other.

The structure of this article is as follows: the first part signalizes the problems with the notion of intimacy and proposes its definition. The second part analyzes liberation thesis approach to intimacy on the basis of A. Giddens' and B. McNair's studies. The third part addresses the main claims of colonization thesis approach by presenting most important aspects of Hochschild's and Beck's studies. The fourth part tries to explain the tensions between liberation and colonization aspects of modern intimacy by setting them in the broader context of modernization in general.

It seems reasonable to begin with a mention that the notion of intimacy is not as clear and simple as it may seem to be². The first problem is that within the existing discourse, intimacy is most often not defined. Moreover, it is often used in different ways that entail its various, sometimes opposite meanings. The second problem is that the definitions which are proposed by some authors seem to be narrowed to the specific realm of intimacy in which the particular author is interested. This article proposes a broad definition of intimacy, which subsumes most phenomena analyzed in the existing studies of transformations of intimacy. Hence, intimacy will be understood as a sphere of culture

²For the sake of clarity it is necessary to emphasize that this article is interested in analyses of socio-cultural aspects of intimacy. The studies where intimacy is approached as a biological, psychical or metaphysical phenomenon are not taken into account.

that includes four realms: love relationships (couples), family relationships, sexual relations and friendship³. This broad definition of intimacy enables one to include most studies that concern the problems of socio-cultural aspects of intimacy.

The main claim of the “liberation thesis approach” is that intimacy and its instances become released from the regulation of custom (emancipation), and that participants of intimate relationships became more equal (democratization). Anthony Giddens analyses this emancipation and democratization mainly by presenting three notions: pure relationship, confluent love, and plastic sexuality. Pure relationship is defined as one in which “a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it”⁴.

It seems reasonable to comment on the abovementioned quotation by contrasting post-traditional pure relationship with traditional marriage. Traditional marriage contains strong hierarchy (man is the head of the house), division of responsibilities imposed by social and gender roles (man is a breadwinner who earns money, woman is a housewife who takes care of the household) and lasts until the death tears spouses apart. Marriage exhibits these features, because it is regulated by traditional custom. By contrast, pure relationship is set up between equal individuals who independently divide responsibilities between themselves and are free to end up the relationship in each particular moment. These features of the pure relationship are enabled by the fact that regulations imposed by an “outside” custom were replaced by regulations bargained by the “inside” participants. As Giddens underlines, pure relationship is not regulated by custom and it is not supposed to reproduce the traditional social order, but depends on the will and satisfaction of its participants. Pure relationship is pure, because it does not contain any outside “dirt”. Moreover, it is constructed purely by its participants and has only one aim, which is providing participants with satisfaction.

The notions of confluent love and plastic sexuality complement the main arguments of the liberation thesis approach. Giddens says that “confluent love,

³This spectrum of intimate field is explicitly stated by Lynn Jamieson, who analyses modern intimacy and provides a distinction of the four abovementioned fields (L. Jamieson, *Intimacy. Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*, Cambridge–Oxford, 1998).

⁴A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Cambridge 1992, p. 58.

while not necessarily androgynous [...] presumes a model of the pure relationship in which [...] person's sexuality is one factor that has to be negotiated as part of a relationship"⁵. Confluent love seems to emphasize the democratic character of pure relationship, by underlining the fact that there are no strict rules or patterns of sexual relationships, which entails that different kinds of relationships (e.g. homosexual relationships) are not worse than the others. In other words "heterosexuality is no longer a standard by which everything else is judged"⁶. This entails that sexuality becomes plastic, which means that individuals are free to shape their sexual relations in their own way — sexual behavior is no longer regulated by custom, but negotiated by participants of a sexual act. To put it differently, "sexuality became malleable [...] and a potential «property» of the individual"⁷. Moreover, plastic sexuality is a sexuality which, thanks to the contraceptive pill, is disjointed from reproduction, freeing individuals (especially women) from the fear of pregnancy and enabling sex as a source of enjoyment.

It seems necessary to notice that pure relationship, confluent love and plastic sexuality support Giddens' concept of the "reflexive project of the self"⁸. Reflexivity means that individuals are no longer provided with certain and permanent traditional norms and values, and have to constantly reconsider their beliefs, reflexively question them, which makes "the question, «Is everything all right?» [...] a leading motif"⁹. Thereby, Giddens puts transformations of intimacy into the broader context of late modernity, whose main feature is the abovementioned reflexivity.

BBrian McNair's claims are quite similar to Giddens', yet they concentrate on only one aspect of intimate transformations, that is on the rising presence of sex in the media. McNair analyses both the growing amount of "real" pornography and the pornographication of the mainstream, presence of pornographic patterns in pop-culture (porno-chic). Although McNair presents various accounts and evaluations of what he calls "sexualization of culture", eventually his approach is very similar to Giddens'. In each of his books, he puts increasing

⁵Ibidem, p. 63.

⁶Ibidem, p. 34.

⁷Ibidem, p. 27.

⁸ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 9.

⁹Ibidem, p. 91.

emphasis on the positive aspects of the “strip-tease culture”. In his first analysis of “mediated sex”, he was moderate about socio-cultural implications of sexualization and merely stated that it “encouraged [...] removal of the male hetero-sexist near-monopoly on accessing the production and consumption of sexual representation in all its forms”¹⁰. However, in the title of his latest book he argues that “pornography changed the world and made it a better place”¹¹, by claiming that “societies in which sexualised culture is the most liberalised and pervasive are also those in which the socio-economic and political rights of women and homosexuals have advanced the most”¹². To put it in another way, McNair claims that sexualization of contemporary culture helps to emancipate women and sexual minorities and thus it democratizes intimate relationships.

To summarize it may be said the liberation thesis approach argues that emancipation and democratization of intimacy seem to be manifested in three main ways. The first way is that intimacy becomes released from regulation of custom and no longer is a matter of tradition and reproduction of social order but a rather a matter of discussion and pleasure. The second is that women are emancipated from the role of housekeepers and from the fear of pregnancy, and that their position in intimate relationships is equal to men’s, which makes those relationships more democratic. The third way is democratization of sexual patterns that entails emancipation of homosexual love and other so-called “sexual minorities”.

According to Giddens and McNair, transformations of intimacy are generally positive. Although they notice some disadvantages (e.g. uncertainty, possible lack of ontological security, sexual compulsions) they consider them as minor difficulties, which do not do any harm to the picture of fulfillment and liberation. Giddens’ optimism is so far-going that it makes him able to believe that “the transformation of intimacy might be a subversive influence upon modern institutions as a whole”¹³, and that “the advancement of self-autonomy in the context of pure relationships is rich with implications for democratic practice in the larger community”¹⁴. Similarly, as observed above, McNair claims, that

¹⁰B. McNair, *Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture*, New York 1996, p. 170.

¹¹B. McNair, *Porno? Chic! How Pornography Changed the World and Made It a Better Place*, Oxford 2012.

¹²*Ibidem*, back cover book description.

¹³A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 3.

¹⁴*Ibidem*, p. 195.

“pornography changed the world and made it a better place”. The liberation thesis approach seem to be one-sided and excessively enthusiastic; however, it would be mistake to claim that this perspective is totally mistaken. Yet it would be interesting to confront the liberation thesis with the claims of advocates of colonization thesis approach, who are less enthusiastic about the consequences of transformations of intimacy.

In a book entitled “The Normal Chaos of Love”, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim consider transformations of intimacy in much more ambiguous way than Giddens and McNair. They agree that intimacy has become emancipated from the regulations of custom, and that men and especially women are no longer prisoners of social and gender roles. They also agree that the intimate life has become a matter of choice and negotiation of its participants and that it seems to bring more opportunities of enjoyment than ever before. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim even present a strong statement that after the collapse of religious beliefs, intimacy (love and family) becomes the source of the meaning of life, fulfillment and happiness.

However, they also discuss the other facets of the situation. They claim that “[t]he sense of freedom, and the actual freedoms which are upsetting the old picture of family life and encouraging the search for a new one, is not an individual intention but a late child of the labour market, buffered by welfare state. It is in fact *labour markets freedom*, which implies that everyone is free to conform to certain pressures and adapt to the requirements of the job market. And it is vital that you internalize these pressures, incorporating them in your own person, daily life and planning for the future, even though they inevitably collide with the demands of our family and the division of labour within it, which by its very nature excludes such imperatives”¹⁵. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim strongly emphasize the influence of the market on intimacy. Whereas Giddens sees pure relationship that is free of outside regulations, they see involvement of capitalism that strongly regulates the intimate life. Intimacy is emancipated from custom, but not from the market; individuals do not have to reproduce the social order based on tradition, but they are encouraged to reproduce social order based on capitalism. However, it must be observed that influence of the market on intimacy is not limited to the simple fact that individuals spend less time with their families and beloved ones because they have to work long hours. It is of course an important prob-

¹⁵U. Beck, E. Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Cambridge 1995, p. 6.

lem, yet there are other, deeper mechanisms through which market invades intimacy. They do not concern the issue of time, but rather the problem of thinking patterns. To put it in Jürgen Habermas' terms, intimacy becomes colonized by the market.

It seems that Arlie Russell Hochschild's studies provides multiple empirical exemplifications of the abovementioned process of colonization of intimacy. Hochschild concentrates on the relationship between the intimate life and the market or, in other words, between emotions and capitalism. In her first book, she presented the notion of "emotional labour"¹⁶. She defines emotional labour as a process of selling intimate emotions as a service on the labour market and organizing those emotions according to rules and procedures characteristic for a particular kind of job. However, from the point of view of this paper, the most interesting analyses are conducted by Hochschild in her latest book entitled "The Outsourced Self"¹⁷. The main thesis of the book is that in contemporary societies individuals often resign from practicing particular actions and responsibilities that are elements of intimate life and decide to outsource them from the third parties. People hire professionals who deal with their responsibilities (maids, nannies, kids party organizers etc.) or experts who teach them how to deal with their intimacy (marriage counselors, love coaches, etc.). It seems reasonable to analyze at least a few examples from the variety of empirical researches which Hochschild presents in "The Outsourced Self".

In the first chapter of the book Hochschild concentrates on the phenomenon of love coaching. She introduces a woman who decided to hire a love coach to improve her chances of finding love *via* dating services on the Internet. The first level of market involvement appears in the language used by the coach who teaches her client that searching for a love is "like searching for a job"¹⁸, and that the "Internet is love mall"¹⁹. However, there are also some deeper mechanisms, e.g. branding. Love coach claims that an internet profile should be a brand of its user, and that the purpose of this brand is to attract as many potential "customers" as possible. Love coaches propose to calculate Return of Investment rate, which does not only concern how many individuals responded to one's profile,

¹⁶A.R. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley 1983.

¹⁷Eadem, *The Outsourced Self: Intimate Life in Market Times*, New York 2012.

¹⁸Ibidem, p. 24.

¹⁹Ibidem, p. 25.

but also how attractive those individuals are; in other words RoI depends on physical appearance, age, social status and other features of attracted “customers”. The sociologist summarizes this part of the book by stating that clients of love coaches are “told to train their attention on finding — not making — connection. They were preparing to become consumers, not creators, of love”²⁰.

Another example of implementing market logic into one’s intimate life by an expert is the functioning of the company called Family360. Family360 appeared as a response to a success of Management360, whose aim was to help large companies to improve their efficiency. As Hochschild puts it, “Family360 brings these ideas home”²¹. Family360 proposition is to think about family as if it were a company. This thinking includes mainly defining and realizing specific aims and becoming a “professional” parent. For this purpose, Family360 offers its clients questionnaires. The questionnaires are designed to help their users become professional parents and offer tasks such “stimulate communication during dinner. Put preselected questions on (or under) the dinner plates of family members” or “audit your family conversations”²². Other family members are also suggested to complete questionnaires to evaluate actions of the “prospective professional”. This approach to family seems to be highly rationalized. There are no spontaneous actions, everything is set up in instructions and should be evaluated in questionnaires. Family360 offers, as one of their main products, “positive memory creation”. However, Hochschild rises a significant question: what will the memories of family members be like? Will they contain moments of joy and happiness or rather a picture of a instructions, evaluations and questionnaires? Family360 seem to try to exchange the spontaneous communicative rationality based on the consensus and understanding for the instrumental rationality based on the control.

Yet, it seems that the most striking example of colonization of intimacy appears in Hochschild’s essay “The Commodity Frontier” from one of her previous books²³. The essay begins with a job offer put on the Internet by a “mild-mannered millionaire businessman, intelligent, traveled, but shy”²⁴, who searches for

²⁰Ibidem, p. 41.

²¹Ibidem, p. 132.

²²Ibidem, p. 133.

²³A.R. Hochschild, *The Commodity Frontier*, [in:] eadem, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes From Home and Work*, San Francisco–Los Angeles 2003, p. 30–44.

²⁴Ibidem, p. 30.

a young, pretty, sensitive and intelligent “personal assistant”. The job includes managing the house, attending house parties, social events and business travels, and making massages (sex is explicitly excluded). Each activity is evaluated by a certain amount of money paid per hour of work.

Hochschild comments on this ad by stating that “the man wants a wife but he doesn’t want to be a husband”²⁵. She also argues that “[i]n sum, the man’s money buys him freedom. It buys him the right to depersonalize a relation. The man wanted to pay the woman instead of owing anything else to her in any other kind of way. He didn’t want to have to feel anything toward her. He exempted himself from family feeling rules. He doesn’t want to even have to have fun. He wants to feel free to have to a relationship — impersonal or personal — as he wished and on the terms he wishes”²⁶.

It is important to notice that as a matter of fact this job offer is a proposition of a pure relationship. It is pure, because it is not regulated by any outside factors, e.g. by a custom. As Hochschild notices, the man intends to shape this potential relationship according to his needs, and if he finds appropriate candidate, they will both agree on the terms of relationship and will conduct it as long as it will be enjoyable for them. Yet it seems that this pure relationship is not an example of emancipation and democratization, as liberation thesis approach suggests. It is rather an example of labour market freedom that was noticed by Beck. Hence, Hochschild studies may be interpreted as an argument against liberation thesis approach. Hochschild seems to be more pessimistic than Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. Whereas the latter claim that intimacy and love are the new religion, which has some difficulties with the market, the American sociologist argues that capitalism is the new religion, and that commercialization of intimacy makes intimate life more and more like a prayer to money. Therefore, even if Giddens and McNair are right (and — to some extent — they probably are) when they claim that transformations of intimacy are often connected with emancipation and democratization of intimate relationships, they fail to recognize the influence of capitalistic market, which colonizes intimacy.

It seems that both perspectives, the liberation thesis approach and the colonization thesis approach, are in some way opposite. Still, in this article they are understood as compatible. The tensions between them seem to be an effect

²⁵Ibidem, p. 35.

²⁶A.R. Hochschild, *The Commodity Frontier*, p. 8; <http://sociology.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/faculty/hochschild/2.%20commodity%20frontier.pdf/>.

of tensions that occur in the studied phenomenon of contemporary intimacy. Modernization of intimacy seems to be highly ambivalent process, just as modernization in general. It seems that both Giddens and McNair concentrate on modernization understood as disenchantment. Modern disenchantment, according to Weber, is a process of rationalization, secularization and detraditionalisation, whereby the fate of individuals descends from the heavens into their own hands. As a matter of fact, Giddens' vision of late modernity seem to underline the advantages of disenchantment and rationalization. Giddens claims that individuals in late modernity are liberated from regulations of traditional customs and religions and are able to freely construct their self-identities and relations with others. Moreover, individuals are supported by the advice of experts who, simply speaking, help to make life (also intimate life) better, easier and more enjoyable. Although Giddens signalizes some problems, e.g. the uncertain nature of expert knowledge which entails lack of ontological security, he seems to suggest that the advantages of modernization are more important than its disadvantages. Therefore, he seems to ignore the deeply ambivalent character of rationalization and disenchantment which was underlined by Weber. Giddens underestimates the fact that rationalization entails not only emancipation and of individuals but also autonomization of instrumental reason.

Hence, the approaches of Beck and Hochschild seem to be complementary to the theory of modernization proposed by Jürgen Habermas, who understands modernization as the process of uncoupling the lifeworld and the systems. The lifeworld is regulated by the communicative rationality and is based on communication, agreement and consensus. The economic and political systems are regulated by the instrumental rationality and the mediums of money and power — they are not based on understanding and consensus, but on control and realization of instrumental goals. However, the uncoupling of the lifeworld and the systems paradoxically engendered new relations between these two realms. Habermas claims that more and more spheres of the lifeworld are regulated by the systems. He calls this process the mediatization of the lifeworld. Yet the mediatization may potentially may become colonization: “In the end, systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus dependent co-ordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is at stake. In these areas, the mediatization of the lifeworld assumes the form of colonization”²⁷. There-

²⁷J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Cambridge 1984, p. 196.

fore, the mediatization becomes colonization when it interferes with symbolic reproduction, the main function of the lifeworld.

It seems that Hochschild's studies present empirical examples of colonization from a specific part of the lifeworld, which is intimacy. The American sociologist claims that human intimate interactions are becoming more and more similar to economic transactions, and that they are no longer regulated by the understanding and communicative rationality, but by money and instrumental rationality. The material reproduction of economical system disrupts the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. Family becomes more and more like company, individuals become more and more like buyers and sellers, providers and consumers.

To summarize, it seems that both liberation thesis approach and colonization thesis approach are one-sided. On the one hand, Giddens and McNair concentrate on the advantages of modernization and ignore the disadvantages. They argue that individuals become emancipated from the customs and that they possess more freedom and more opportunities than before. Moreover, according to McNair and Giddens, individuals (especially women and sexual minorities) have become more equal, and the intimacy has become more democratic. Furthermore, individuals are supported by experts and professionals, who offer their services and advice. On the other hand Beck, Beck-Gernsheim and especially Hochschild, discuss mainly disadvantages of modernization. They analyze the commercialization and rationalization as unintended consequences of expert advice. They agree that intimacy has been emancipated from tradition, but they argue that it has been colonized by capitalism and becomes more and more functional to the market. Consequently, it seems that liberation and colonization thesis approach should be understood not as opposite and contradictory approaches but as complementary perspectives, which demonstrate the ambivalent character of modernization of intimacy and modernization in general.

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INTYMNOŚĆ I NOWOCZESNOŚĆ.

MODERNIZACJE MIŁOŚCI W KULTURZE ZACHODU

Streszczenie

Tekst stanowi próbę skonfrontowania dwóch wysoce odmiennych stanowisk dotyczących problematyki współczesnych przemian intymności. Pierwsze z nich, repre-

zentowane głównie przez A. Giddensa i B. McNaira, skupia się na analizie emancypacyjnego i demokratyzującego charakteru przemian zachodzących w sferze intymnej. Tymczasem druga postawa, którą zajmują badacze tacy, jak U. Beck, E. Gernsheim-Beck, E. Illouz czy Arlie Russell Hochschild, koncentruje się na rozpoznaniu procesów racjonalizacji i komercjalizacji intymności. Te opozycyjne i — jak mogłoby się wydawać — niespójne stanowiska zostają w ramach niniejszego tekstu przedstawione jako komplementarne. Przez osadzenie ich w szerszym kontekście klasycznych koncepcji modernizacji M. Webera i J. Habermasa podjęto próbę wykazania, że wzmiankowane wyżej stanowiska stanowią jednostronne diagnozy, które dopiero potraktowane jako komplementarne pozwalają dostrzec i wyjaśnić ambiwalentny charakter modernizacji intymności oraz procesów modernizacyjnych w ogólności.