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Equal in the Eyes of Capitalist God: Gay Marriage and the Contemporary Intimacy Regime

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Abstract

The United States Supreme Court's decision no. 4-5, from June 2015, ruling that state-level bans on same-sex marriage are illegal, was received with excitement all over the Western world. On top of it being a global milestone on the way to improve gays' civil rights, it also conveyed the consistent position of the capitalistic culture by giving its approval and legalizing its influence on emotional identities and establishments.

In this paper, I would like to examine the global reaction to the court's decision, in light of our times essential conflict, which differentiates between two modes of capitalism: the industrial and the consumerist. The tension that prevails between these two contradictory modes of present capitalism, does not relate exclusively to economic and social contexts, but also to the way individuals choose or are obliged to lead their emotional lives. It serves as a depth structure, which activates essential neurosis concerning identity politics and self-management practices.

The heart of this paper will be a reading into the marital institution, positioned in the neurotic encounter point of the two capitalistic modes, hence arising overwhelming emotions of anxiety and compassion. What can the US court's decision, and the way it was received, tell us about marital life functioning in the capitalist ideology context? and what is the price all humans – either identified as gay or straight – will be called to pay because of it?

Keywords: Gay Marriage, Consumerism, Industrial Capitalism, Intimacy, Emotional Economy

The US Supreme Court ruling of May 2015 in favor of same-sex marriage nationwide was enthusiastically greeted in the entire Western world. Social networks spawned elated support; facebook profile pictures were painted in rainbow colors; mainstream news and opinion sites featured a spate of articles cheering the decision.

But what caught my attention in these outbursts of joy and support in Israel, which I, naturally, also shared, was the presence of somehow unexpected participants in this celebration. Public figures who had staunchly opposed same-sex marriage, for obvious reasons pertaining to the sacred nature of the institution, had turned their coat: conservative political leaders, journalists, celebs and opinion leaders backed the Supreme Court's decision, some enthusiastically, others in sober resignation. They supported the symbolic right of gay men and women to get married under the state's auspices, a right Israel has yet to grant. Rabbi Avi Gisser, a leading figure in the religious Zionist sector, wrote: "we have moved from our past dismissal and judgment to a cautious and more aware approach";¹ and the conservative journalist Eli Suberi wrote: "Many same-sex couples, among the best sons and daughters of the State of Israel, people good enough to defend its borders and to contribute to its economy and development, are forced to express their love like thieves in the night. This iniquity should be redressed."²

As a cultural studies scholar I would like to raise the following question: what are the reasons and meaning of this turnabout, which obviously was not initiated by a particular person's revelation. One answer may be related to Israeli pink-washing policy, which is, indeed, gathering momentum and finding increasing resonance, while trying to enlist public opinion in both Israel and Europe as the conditions of Palestinians' lives in the occupied territories deteriorate. But this may not be a satisfactory explanation, because similar processes were visible also in some conservative European countries that haven't yet legalized same-sex marriage, such as Spain, Austria, Malta and Slovenia, as well as in favorable reactions to the Supreme Court's decision among conservative circles in the US.

Another explanation may lie in the adjustment of public opinion, which has gradually discarded prejudices. Political struggle yields results—it removes the fetters of prejudice from consciousness, thus producing social change. Yet a question remains: why now, and what social forces have accelerated or contributed to this change?

The explanation I am about to suggest touches on the interrelations between the institution of marriage

and life practices under capitalism. I would like to argue that the changes in these interrelations have laid a historical and ideological foundation of interests and anxieties that has fostered acceptance of same-sex marriage among conservative circles.

As we know, these aren't auspicious times for the institution of marriage, or monogamy in general, as we can notice in the constant rise in the divorce rate in the Western world;³ or in the emergence of alternative romantic and intimate configurations, which are gradually gaining social legitimacy (like single parent families, polymeric relationships or serial monogamies). The most powerful evidence is the insistent conservative campaign that promotes the institution of marriage through popular culture, thus pointing to the urgent need to preserve a threatened institutional status quo.⁴

The reasons behind these phenomena are rather transparent: first, a marriage contract is no longer the only mean to financial comfort. In most western countries, women are no longer solely dependent on their husbands' income, and men do not need to be household heads in order to attain status or wealth. The marriage contract has therefore lost the evident economic characteristic it had throughout history.

Furthermore, the institution of marriage is a lurching raft in the stormy sea of a culture that celebrates and even requires self-realization, the pursuit of happiness and emotional individualism. We replace and upgrade everything: our apartment, furniture, computer, cell phone, the next vacation site, hobbies and also our acquaintances. We do so gleefully, with a sense of development and enhancement. Every TV ad informs us that our happiness depends on this upgrade. This state of affairs isolates the intimate monogamous relationship, turning it into a task that conflicts with other areas of our life. In a culture that demands uncompromising self-upgrade, the institution of marriage has remained an anachronistic remnant of compromise, predictability, concessions and restraint.

As a result, the current tension between the institution of marriage and its cultural environment can be parsed into a series of tensions associated with couplehood. All the self-help books that address the preservation of such relationships describe one or more of these tensions: personal freedom vs. emotional security; gratification of personal needs vs. gratification of the other's needs; separateness vs. togetherness; quarrels vs. growth; passion vs. intimacy; steadfastness vs. the need for excitement.⁵

I'd like to argue that the depth structure of these tensions derives from a primary conflict lodged in the ways we live our lives within the capitalist ideology. Capitalism operates in two contradictory modes of identity and behavior, between which we cannot choose; even in our relationships, we are trapped and waver between these modes.⁶

The first mode, which following Max Weber Illouz defines as "industrial capitalism," imposes a social method of human and economic organization whose core values are "utilitarian," namely, efficiency, profitability and gratification of interests.⁷ During work hours, we are required to be self-promoting organization members and managers in order to increase our capital under competitive conditions. We are also required to abide by ethical standards because they are utilitarian, that is, they fit into the mental structure that prizes rationalism and deliberation as profit-maximizing. The cardinal values of the industrial ethos are diligence, rationalism, ambition, devotion to the reality principle, self-control, strategic conduct intent on long-term goals, investment, the ability to postpone gratification, self-interested capital accumulation. All these impose both professional practices and the emotional conduct that drives and sustains them.

In the early 20th century, capitalism generated another mode, namely, "consumerist capitalism", which celebrates impulsiveness, irrationality, hedonism, altruism, leisure, spending, devotion to the pleasure principle and instant emotional gratification. Its cradle, according to Illouz,⁸ is Freud's famous 1917 lecture in the USA, which was instantly adopted by the advertising industry. To advertisers, Freud's idea that the human being is driven by unconscious, irrational instincts seemed enticing, as understanding them would reinforce consumer persuasion practices. Freud's theory thus offered legitimacy and, as it set the libido at the core of human motivation, it helped generate consumer capitalism. Addressing the libido has since been at the center of the branding and advertising industry, which promotes values of self-indulgence, prestige, passion, glamour and happiness in the context of personal self-fulfilment.

These two conflictual capitalist modes have divided our lives into the professional sphere of productivity and the private sphere of non-work, that is, leisure, which comprises family and couplehood. The individual is therefore a divided entity, and our existential distress is largely related to this split. Illouz shows how our lives and even a single day generally lack emotional and behavioural consistency or a coherent identity: in the morning we are required to be efficient members of an organization, who behave according to industrial principles; after work we conform to consumer principles.⁹ Any transgression of these discrete behavioural modes entails judgment or punishment. For example, a spillover of consumer principles into the work sphere might yield a manager perceived as "soft" and too considerate, unassertive, weak or lazy. The reverse spillover, of industrial principles into the leisure and family sphere, might prompt severe judgment of parents who don't

"have fun" with their children, don't pamper and support them but display a cold, demanding and strict behaviour.¹⁰

The tensions I described earlier, which are associated with monogamous relationships, stem from this primary split; they raise the burning question: does marriage belong to the sphere of leisure, to the satisfaction of needs, to pleasure, joy and instant gratification, or to the "work" sphere, that is, does it require controlled management, self-interest, restraint and perseverance? In other words, does this institution belong to industrial or to consumer capitalism?

Magazines and self-help books, advice columns and talk shows offer an unequivocal answer. To preserve a relationship in the long-term one must enforce the emotional rules of the work sphere. A relationship contract requires unremitting hard work.¹¹ The discourse on relationships reiterates terms from the industrial world: investment, determination, tenacity, commitment, loyalty, motivation, competence, communication, conflict management, balance, coordinated expectations, strategy, constant challenge and responsibility.

This position is almost self-evident, yet fascinating when examined from a slight distance: we work long hours in a factory or an office, and at home we keep working, but now on our relationship, on romance, on sex. This hard work, which belongs to the industrial sphere, has infiltrated the domestic sphere. The withering institution of marriage raises therefore the following question: does the old monogamy factory, which is grappling with a cultural environment that marginalizes its products, also straining to preserve its workforce?

To preserve the workforce, and also to enlist newcomers, a persuasive campaign is called for. The protestant ethos of hard work is facing the consumer slogan of couplehood, which thrives on alluring romantic comedies, vacation ads or marriage vows: the "one", the twin soul who will be the main source of happiness throughout one's entire life; whose love will be unconditional; who will always feel and do the right thing; who will meet all one's emotional, intellectual and sexual needs. Yet this is a false slogan, because in real life these functions are constantly privatized, that is, transferred from the couple to family members, children, friends and lovers. This may be why the campaign's forcefulness is so dramatic: the institutional life of hard work must be wrapped as a seductive and fateful promise of infinite harmony and effortless excitement. In capitalist terms, we are dealing with an obsessive, hysterical, treacherous campaign: the industrial merchandise is being sold as a consumerist promise.

This campaign reveals that marriage is an industrial factory in trouble; People leave it, quit their positions. Yet surprisingly, marriage has received a boost from an unexpected source--the gay community. Here comes cheap and enthusiastic labor, which is able to rehabilitate the institution, to restore its desirability and increase the symbolic and economic profits of its sales, at least temporarily. The US Supreme Court's decision rescued this tottering institution; no wonder, then, that conservative circles welcome it so warmly. To a large extent, precisely the approval, rather than the prohibition, of gay marriage contributes to the preservation of the institutional status quo.

So now we must ask: will the Supreme Court's decision lead to the queerification of marriage or to the adjustment of various forms of intimacy into heteronormative rules? In other words, will the new dedicated workers change the working rules at the factory or will they obey its procedures? Will the institution of marriage be rescued only temporarily or will the new workforce reorganize it for the sake of future preservation?

About the Author

Omri Herzog, Associate professor, is the head of the Cultural Studies Department at Sapir College, Israel. His main research interests are corporal politics, the interface between canonical and popular, the horror genre and Israeli culture. He is also an award-winning literary critic for "Haaretz" newspaper.

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³ US Census Bureau Report: *Number, Timing and Duration of Marriage and Divorces* (Feb. 2015).

⁴ Omri Herzog, "What is the Territory of Marriage?", *Haaretz*, June 1, 2015, 3.

⁵ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (New York: Polity, 2007), 45-61.

⁶ Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 21-44.

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⁸ Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 77.

⁹ Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 42.

¹⁰ Julie B. Olson-Buchanan and Wendy R. Boswell, “Blurring boundaries: Correlates of integration and segmentation between work and non-work”, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 68 (2006): 432–45.

¹¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 49-55.