



REVIEW

Aliraza Javaid, *Masculinities, Sexualities and Love*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2019. Pp. 189. ISBN: 978-0-8153-8065-8 (hardback).

Masculinities, Sexualities, and Love begins with a seemingly simple question: why is the concept of love so sparingly addressed – specifically in sociology and in general across the disciplines – in a way that would allow us to understand the reality we inhabit? The bulk of Javaid's seven chapters are an attempt to find just such an answer. The text begins from two important premises, first an examination of historical-philosophical order and secondly reflecting on method. Following Foucault's thought, Javaid does not believe that love means something natural or possessing its own essence. Therefore, there is no human love and there is no idea of an absolute love; consequently, there is no "correct" love or radically "wrong" form of love. The nature of love and love bonds is that they are always and perpetually the result of a power network. It is the elements of a society, the history of a country, legal systems and social organizations that determine what possibilities, what spaces and what practices fall into the category of "love." With this in mind, one should not expect to receive a "definitive" or eternally valid answer to the question "what is love?", but rather, consistent with the first premise, one will find an analysis of how concrete contemporary factors, in the society in which the author lives, determine what is socially considered as belonging to the realm of relationships and love.

Having elucidated this framework with which to understand "love," his second premise, on method, logically follows. If love is nothing definable once and for all, and if love is produced in its forms and practices by the concrete symbols with which each society realizes it, then the experience of individuals living in specific societies becomes more fundamental than a general theory of what love is. Recognizing the impossibility of defining the essence of love, Javaid finds it more useful and necessary to analyze the societal practices of power which define love. The book can be positioned in the genre of autoethnography, which Javaid defines citing the description given by one of its major scholars (Ellis, et. al, 2011): "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze [...] personal experience [...] in order to understand cultural experience". This sociological description is also consistent with Michel Foucault's or Gilles Deleuze's approach to the study of power and society, namely perspectivism. This mode of thought, by emphasizing the hermeneutics of the subject rather than simple

relativism, demonstrates the ways in which a part of the world tells the truth about itself, that is, the ways in which it self-produces (Deleuze, 1988). Getting the individual to speak, then, may prove to be one of the best approaches to understanding, even beyond the official sciences or theories already known, of how power actually reproduces itself and constructs its own symbols. In an act of courage, Javaid defines himself as homosexual, a resident of England and member of a minority religious community. What we have expected from this text, namely a theory of love, begins precisely from his point of view, within a multitude of details carving out a precise space within the network of power, to move us closer to a definition and conceptualization of the amorous topic.

Inevitably, given the author's biographical details, at the center of the book is the theme of masculinity. Power, especially in modern and contemporary times, has built much of its stability on the male gender. The man as the head of the family, the holder of political and military power, and the one capable of creating culture and cultivating thought, lies at the center of Western society. Although some power structures have been shifting in recent decades, this legacy still weighs on males growing up in European countries (Javaid focuses, especially, on England). Homosexuality could be studied as a mechanism that challenges this image of Western heterosexual men, critiquing it and offering a possible alternative. In fact, Javaid's book is interesting precisely because it does not fall into such simplistic positions: homosexuality is not simply the "negative" of heterosexuality, since sexual and amorous practice is always the result of different concrete interweavings of power, determined by individual practices. Heterosexuality and homosexuality do not correspond to the only two possible poles defining sexual and romantic relationships between men, but both are more intertwined, intimate and mixed than at first glance, leaving room for different types of sexuality still unearthed. Male sexuality, and therefore a man's affectivity, is the result of much more layered relationships of power imbued with the symbols that society brings with it. Javaid comes to trace six different types of masculinity: hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, marginalized and protest. Five different ways of being "male" that trace equally different and possible ways of understanding love relationships, one's sexuality and one's role in society.

What emerges clearly from the book is how today, however, the Western male is still burdened by the stigma of a society that imagines him as its center of production par excellence. A man is required to hide his affectivity, to live secretly or with fear for every sexual desire that does not conform to the imposed standard, and to pay with a sense of shame for every escape from the "imposed" role. Only with much effort is an attempt being made today to dismantle this idea of Western man, and Javaid shows very well how far we are from this result. In fact, the book also offers interesting interviews with men from all walks of life and backgrounds, who are questioned on their relationship with sexuality, with affectivity, with the tools with which they seek relationships today (dating apps), and on their expectations for the future. What emerges is the image of a male who is more uncertain, compared to the past, about himself, his role and his desires; and if this means that there is an ongoing questioning of the male about himself, it is also an important symptom of the fact that our society is marked by a deep sense of unease mixed

with anxiety, depression and uncertainty. Feelings perhaps also linked to the economic situation in which we all find ourselves immersed, and which is therefore also coming to influence our way of loving.

Ultimately, *Masculinities, Sexualities and Love* offers an accurate and acute analysis of what sociology has said so far about love and male relationships and proposes a method to go even more profoundly into a still largely amorphous field. Javaid, moreover, precisely because of his sociological approach, also investigates what emerges from films, books and the most common products of society, believing that these are also fundamental in order to understand how power is currently structuring the organization of what we call "love". For its approach, method, style and content, Javaid's text is certainly an interesting work to which one hopes other "voices" and points of view will be added, so that a more complete picture of how our society allows us to love will be revealed. Indeed, only by understanding the actual lines of power in which we are immersed can we hope to change them for a better society and a better world.

References

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