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Conceptualising the Romantic Relationship[*]

Abstract: This paper approaches the phenomenon of the "romantic relationship" as understood within some of the most prominent paradigms in the social sciences. These interpretative frameworks are then applied to the model of the romantic relationship acquired during my own research on the concepts of romantic relationships among young professionals in Belgrade, Serbia. I argue that none of the presented frameworks can be solely relied upon to explain the phenomenon, but that in combination they do offer very valuable insights. This represents an example of how the application of different paradigms in social sciences can help to clarify the nature of a phenomenon, rather than representing a ground for contestation.

Key words: romantic relationship, romantic love, pure relationship, social elites, social reproduction, transition.

Introduction

The concept of romantic love and romantic relationships occupies an important place in the contemporary world. The theme is ever-so-present in the media, from gossip columns regularly dedicated to the romantic ups and downs of "celebrities", to sitcoms and TV shows (HBO's *Sex and the City* series probably being the most popular, but this show is far from being the only example); from lyrics of pop songs to even "serious" or avant-garde literature and filmmaking. Look anywhere – you will be certain to find an abundance of stories and narratives connected to love and its affairs.

It is of course easy to claim that this omnipresence represents a masking of another desire – that of the attainment of happiness, often (and in a patriarchal manner) personified in a "perfect" union of two members of opposite sexes. However, this argument somehow lacks strength – for example, it doesn't explain why persons attracted to the same sex often harbour concepts of love and romance quite similar to the heterosexual, nor why people are obsessed

with "failed" love affairs as much as (or even more) than those that have a
happy ending. In the same vein, it also fails to explain why people are prone
to sticking with individuals who do everything but make them happy. One
may resort to the "power of the media" argument, claiming that people are
obsessed with romantic relationships because the media flood them with such
images. However, this – again – does not explain why the presence of such
imagery in the media began in the first place, and secondly, it reduces people
to mere boxes in which the "evil" media can pour whatever content they wish
to (see Evans 1998 for a critique of this concept, for instance; also Abu-
Lughod's interpretation of the role of soap operas among women in Egypt).

The above explanations are frequently used in everyday discourse and espe-
cially in popular science. All of them consistently refuse to take into account
how *real* people imagine, narrate and construct the concept of romantic rela-
tionships – in other words, many of them lack any but the shallowest empirical
grounding. Therefore, I will now turn to academic narratives on romantic rela-
tionships that have attempted to explain the phenomenon in a more in-depth
manner. Below I shall take a look at some which have been most prominent in
20th-century social thought. Then, I will consider how, why, and which of them
can relate to the empirical evidence of how a certain group of people envisage
and narrate their personal experiences concerning romantic relationships.

History

Interest in romantic love and relationships begins in the discipline of his-
tory with the proliferation of social and oral history – in other words, of forms
of historical narratives that started paying more attention to everyday life, and
less to topics previously considered traditional: diplomacy and warfare.
Probably the most important writer about this topic was Danny de Rouge-
ment, who in 1947 published "L'Amour et l'Occident" (*Love and the Western
World,* 1983). De Rougement firmly stated – and supplied historical evidence
to corroborate his statement – that romantic love as a phenomenon is not uni-
versal, as it was commonly assumed to be, but rather a product of very spe-
cific historical, social and cultural circumstances limited to the Medieval
courts in Europe.

De Rougement connects the "romantic love complex" with the myth of
Tristan and Isolde. Reconstructing the genesis and different versions of the
myth, de Rougement claims that what gives the myth its specific message and
meaning is the idea that "true", romantic love is the one that can never be
attained – at least not in this world. In other words, love is only romantic inso-
far as it's unfulfilled, and the yearning that furnishes it kept constant. Once

love is actuated, embodied, rendered real – it loses its appeal and becomes in fact the exact opposite of itself – dull, mundane, emotionless marriage.

De Rougement traces the social origins of such a hard dualism into the realities of feudal life in Medieval Europe. Marriages, he contends, were in fact mostly dull and boring; they were not the product of love, but rather of careful planning with only one purpose in mind – preservation or expansion of property (land). As the opposite of such a picture, romantic love was ignited in the courts of medieval Europe, gaining the name "courtly" – and constituted of a knight (or young nobleman) "courting" the lady of his choice, yet without any expectance of reciprocity. Thus, de Rougement claims, the "romantic love complex" was handed down through ages in literature and poetry, sometimes changing in form but still retaining its key characteristic: eternal unattainability.

Though de Rougement's analysis is very informative, one may wonder how much it really actually helps in understanding the nature of romantic love and connected phenomena today. Yes, perhaps romantic love was created as an almost fantastic contrast to the drudgery of marriage, or social alliance, guided only by the interests of families and other authorities, and not the persons getting married. However, we might – with considerable grounding – contend that the setting has significantly changed since then. At least in certain parts of the world, people are no more forced to enter marriages just for the sake of property. Why, then, does romantic love as concept still exist, and what motivates romantic relationships?

Sociology

One meta-narrative that, among other things, sought specifically to explain the social nature of contemporary romantic relationships stems from sociology. "Late" or "Second Modernity", as described by Anthony Giddens, and in part by Ulrich Beck, was a diagnosis attributed to most of the affluent societies at the end of the 20th century (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992). As its proponents claimed, modernity as a total narrative is gone; however, institutions and practices that have replaced it could be best described as its extension or modification, but not its exact opposite, hence the name "Second Modernity". In terms of personal relationships, the chief change was seen in the level of their social embededness. While in modernity social relationships existed in a means still essential to survival, in second modernity no such pressure exists, and therefore people are free to form alliances and personal rapports with the persons they wish, rather than the persons they must (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). In the romantic domain, this is first characterized by the liberalization of marriage, and its transformation into a unity of free will. However, more importantly, personal – intimate – relationships have expanded far

beyond the constraints of marriage. Many people prefer to live together but not get married; some don't even share a residence; some are of the same sex; some have other partners outside the given relationship; etc. In sum, what characterizes contemporary romantic relationships is total liberty, mobility, contingency and dependence only on mutual consensus – that of the couple itself (see Levin 2004). Outside influences, such as family, property, customs, religion etc, are rapidly losing their persuasive force in the formation of romantic relationships. Therefore Giddens christened them "pure relationships" – meaning not "tainted" by external pressures and expectations. However, the pure relationship also entailed an element of "risk", in Beck's (1992) sense; because of the absence of external mechanisms to support (or constrain) it, it was definitely more unstable and breakable than the old-fashioned one. Despite this "flaw", both Giddens and Beck saw pure relationships as a paragon of second modernity, a promise of democratization and true liberation of even that most vigilantly guarded domain of modernity, the private life.

Most people would probably agree that this approach is sound and promising. However, one may wonder how applicable it actually is to the world that does not belong to the societies Giddens and Beck used as a basis for their theories. Although the idea of a Second Modernity is deeply intertwined with the globalized world, it makes sense to consider that not all couples, even less everywhere, can afford to jet from one part of the world to another pursuing their leisure interests and developing independence from each other, while at the same time nourishing the "pure relationship" (see Gross and Simmons 2002; Jamieson 1999 for different forms of criticism of Giddens' ideas). One only had to look to the still existing practice of arranged marriages in some parts of the world to conclude that the transformation of intimacy Giddens wrote about might not be occurring everywhere.

Therefore, no matter how helpful and constructive insights from history and sociology regarding the nature of romantic relationships had been, they remain attached to the very particular historical, geographical, political or economical domains. There isn't a way we can successfully claim that they would be useful in explaining other instances of romantic relationships.

Anthropology

Anthropology was a science that took an entirely different perspective. Unlike its sociological and historical predecessors, and sometimes in opposition, anthropologists took to explaining what of the nature of romantic relationships is commonly shared among all human beings (and perhaps not only them).

In a 1992 article with the title "A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Romantic Love", Jankowiak and Fischer decided to investigate various sources of information on different cultures assembled in the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. Their idea was to refute de Rougement's hypothesis of the particularity of the idea of romantic love. By studying ethnographic reports, folk tales, mythology etc, the two discovered that a concept of "romantic" love exists in most of them. Their conclusion was that romantic love constitutes a human universal, or at least a near-universal, meaning that it is present in the prevailing number of societies (Jankowiak and Fischer 1992).

One of the most influential paradigms to have attempted to explain the universal characteristics of romantic love and relationships came to be known as evolutionary psychology. Although it is often classified according to its name as a psychological science, because of its claims of universality, it has since the early days relied on cross-cultural comparison as a classical anthropological tool. But the proponents of this paradigm sought similarities not only between contemporary cultures, but also between living human species and their ancestors.

This approach stems directly from evolutionary psychology's intellectual basis, Darwin's theory of evolution. Evolutionary psychologists have accepted elements of this theory, including mechanisms such as adaptation, natural selection, and the reproduction of species. Furthermore, evolutionary psychology claims that these principles apply not only to the morphological or physiological, but also to the psychological characteristics of human species. In short, the forces that shaped all life forms on Earth have caused and shaped human mental capacities (see Dunbar, Barrett and Lycett 2007). Therefore, human behaviour – and the mechanisms that lie at its core – represent a result of a very long evolution during which the species that gradually became H. sapiens encountered numerous dangers and obstacles; evolutionary psychologists claim that the mechanisms designed to prevent and combat these still play an important role in the determination of this behaviour. Discoveries in the domain of gene research have enabled evolutionary psychologists to better understand how certain adaptive characteristics might have been passed from parents to offspring; additional power came from Hamilton's theory of inclusive fitness, that postulated that organisms need not necessarily work on the reproduction of their own genes, but on the genes of their close relatives, since they will to some extent share these, and thus the reproduction of an individual's next of kin would assure the reproduction of at least a portion of the individual's genes (Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby 1992). Robert Trivers further developed these theories, explaining such diverse phenomena as parental investment, altruism and conflict (Buss 1999). The hybridization of a psychological and biological approach reached its culmination in E.O. Wilson's highly disputed *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975). Regardless of its arguments, Wilson attracted such hostility from much

of academia that his approach never became mainstream. Contemporary evolutionary psychology is chiefly distanced from sociobiology, taking the latter to be a radicalized form of biological determinism; evolutionary psychologists, in essence, claim that the principles governing human and animal behaviour are not identical, but rather different results of the same processes – adaptation, natural selection and reproduction.

Evolutionary psychology has a number of levels of analysis. Its basic premise is the general theory of evolution (in its contemporary form, understood as the theory of inclusive fitness). This is followed by mid-range evolutionary theories (Buss 1999: 41-42), such as Trivers' concept of parental investment. In terms of reproduction, the postulate is that members of that sex which invests more in reproduction will harbour higher standards in the choice of partners; whereas the other sex will be less "choosy", but more competitive towards peers in access to members of the opposite sex. In the case of human beings, the more investing sex (in biological terms) is female – for them, producing offspring requires at least nine months of gestation, delivery, and constant care for a period of time after birth. Men, on the other hand, can produce offspring with minimum investment – technically, just one act of copulation would do. This leads to women being more selective in the choice of partners, and orients them towards choosing the ones that display capability to provide resources for offspring after the birth – say, men who appear to command a wealth of material resources. On the other hand, men are less discriminative in the choice of partners: they only look for physical signs of fertility, i.e. capability to bear children – e.g. wide hips, large breasts, etc. However, once offspring have been produced they are in fact likely to direct their resources towards the mother and children (Dunbar, Barrett and Lycett 2007).

In *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (1994) David Buss summarized findings from a vast number of cross-cultural research projects concerning the mechanisms of human mating. Therefore, evolutionary psychology distinguishes, firstly, between two sorts of "mating strategies": long- and short-term (1994: 16-18). The latter are directed only at the producing of offspring, and therefore, both sexes when engaging in these look only for the signs of "good genes" of the partner – i.e. health and looks. However, the former take into account the offspring's growth and development as well. Within these, women, as stated, place the emphasis on the signs that the partner will be willing to invest his resources in her and her children – therefore, love, commitment, emotional stability and maturity. Material wealth, or rather the demonstration of it, is a "natural" basis – and with this, usually comes "social capital" as well, or the wealth of resources other than the purely material ones. Good health and looks also count. However, less than with men; it is claimed that regardless of the type of mating strategy men place prime emphasis on the looks of their partner, i.e. the signs that she is capable of bearing

children. In a "traditional" hunter-gatherer society, it is claimed, there isn't even a chance that the woman would have to act as a primary provider for the offspring, and therefore her "qualities" in this respect are never evaluated. The combination of the stated preferences leads to the (as evolutionary psychologists claim) universal preference in age difference: women everywhere prefer older men, whereas men prefer younger women. The rationale is that the older men are, the higher their status; while the younger reproductive age a woman is, the higher the likelihood that she would produce healthy offspring and the larger the number of offspring to which she may give birth (Buss 1994, 1989).

Evolutionary psychology does, in fact, seem rational and well-founded. However, how useful is it in the study of actual personal relationships? What can it say about the dynamics of one-to-one manifestations of romantic love? If we look from this perspective, the scene seems a bit more complicated or blurred.

The method of evolutionary psychology focuses on testing hypotheses through, for example, experiments and questionnaires intended to discover which elements men consider attractive in women. Another angle starts from considering the actual behaviour – say, aggressiveness in male groups – and attempts to find an evolutionary explanation, i.e. the reason why this particular form of behaviour could have (had) adaptive significance. Therefore, evolutionary psychology relies on various sources of data – archaeological remains, ethnographies of contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, observation, personal reports and data on life histories, as well as statistics (Buss 1999: 58-60). However, one striking exemption from the information pool of evolutionary psychology are contemporary ethnographies of the developed societies which normally represent the focus of social scientists. Despite its interest in "hunter-gatherer" societies (whatever these might be, since an enormous majority of societies previously termed that are already under Western technological influence and have been for some time), the behaviour of persons belonging to Western, developed societies is only inferred through such general methods such as questionnaires, hypothetical situations and so on. An exception to these is the observed behaviour in the so-called "singles bars", where evolutionary psychologists claim they observe behaviour completely corresponding to the principles of attraction outlined above. However, these may also be misleading in terms of its relation to real-life behaviour: since the primary goal of visiting a "singles bar" is, in evolutionary terms, short-term mating. Thus it is extremely likely that individuals would exhibit highly stereotypical, gender-specific behaviour, consciously (or subconsciously) adhering to their "biological" roles and impersonating the ideal of ultra-femininity or ultra-masculinity, not because this behaviour might actually be synchronised with their attitudes and opinions, but because it allows them to unanimously send signs that they are "on the market". Whether this typical behaviour persists when paired individuals move on into conversation and

activities that may or may not ensue for the most part remains hidden from investigators. This is, of course, no surprise: since personal relationships or "mating behaviour" are among the "paragons of privacy" of modern humans, for anthropologists – be they evolutionary or not – it is very hard to follow them. Therefore, we come to the necessity of interviews – or *talk* – in terms of understanding human behaviour, especially in terms of romantic relationships. Another anthropological paradigm, however, will be of much more help here.

Cognitive Anthropology

The idea that the way people talk in a way reflects and, even, defines "reality" was one of the founding ideas not only of anthropology but also of linguistics. However, after the rise and demise of structuralism, anthropologists remained interested in one thing: how people think. Furthermore, it remained tacitly understood that the ways they think are reflected in the ways they speak about things. In essence, speech is a uniquely human capacity; we have very little chance of finding out why a person is acting in a particular way, save for the person's (verbal) explanation. It should, of course, never be taken for granted: it is apparent that people can lie or distort their motivations. However, from the standpoint of anthropology, this is of no lesser importance: regardless of its connection with the "truth" (whatever it may be), people's narratives are usually very instructive and precise reflections both of their inner states and the (perceived) values of their cultures (D'Andrade 1995).

Cognitive anthropology, in fact, began with the study of words (for example Berlin and Kay 1969). This evolved into semantic, and then representational structures, leading to systems of classification. Over schemata and scripts, it came to complex "entities" such as mental models and concepts. These are of utmost importance for the topic of this research. Namely, if we are to understand why and how people get involved in romantic relationships, it is vital that we first understand what they actually *mean* by these (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992; Holland and Quinn 1987).

The basis of my fieldwork, then, was a number of unstructured and semi-structured interviews, in which informants spoke about their "romantic relationships". Informants were drafted from circles of friends, acquaintances, and people who had heard of research and volunteered to take part. Such a "closed" approach turned out to be necessary because of the sensitivity of the topic involved; simply put, nobody wanted to speak about their romantic relationships to a total stranger. This, of course, influenced the structure of the sample. The final number of interviewees was 27, 15 women and 12 men, between the ages of 22 and 34. All of them had either completed, or were in the process of completing higher education; were living in Belgrade; and by a number of charac-

teristics ranged from being middle to upper middle class. These characteristics, as we shall see shortly, influenced the results in quite a pronounced manner. However, the fact itself does not render the results useless; it just serves to remind us that we shouldn't infer broad conclusions from a limited pool of cases.

The structure and organisation of fieldwork was such that I strived for the communication to occur in a "natural" setting – over coffee, chatting etc. Informants were, of course, aware that I was doing research; however, the chief idea was that their narratives should be as close to informal communication as possible. I either collected the stories, reflections and gossip they volunteered, or prompted them to talk about their views, experiences and feelings in this domain. No or very little further guidance was offered. I found this approach to be very helpful when initiating contact with informants; without exception, the interviews were long, informative, and I was able to gather a lot of information. From this information, though of course with certain amounts of variation, does emerge a "mental model" of a romantic relationship that could be abstracted from the interviews with my informants. Its chief characteristics are summarized below[1].

The Concept of Romantic Relationship

Interviews would usually begin with a neutral and open question to the informants phrased as "What can you tell me about your (romantic) relationships?" or (a bit more specifically) "How many relationships would you say you have had?". However, the question, which appears "normal" and general, almost always immediately encountered a counter-question from the informants: "What do you mean by a relationship?" (or, "It depends on what counts as a (romantic) relationship"). Informants were told that what they counted as relationships matters, and that they can speak about those, as well as – should they wish – about other relationships not classified as such. What immediately ensued is that informants have an idea of a distinction between a relationship ("proper relationship") and other types of romantic liaisons (which, just for the sake of distinction, are here referred to as "non-relationships"). The latter were

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[1] Of course, this concise presentation leaves out many of the variations of informants' narratives themselves. I have opted for this for two reasons – one is to economize space, since the article would otherwise become too long; the other is that, being in Serbian, informants' narratives would lose some of their meaning in translation. To those interested in my research, and its detailed results, I recommend my doctoral dissertation entitled "The Cultural Construction of Romantic Relationships" that can be found at the Library of the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade).

most commonly classified as *flings*, *sex-friendships*, or *one-night stands* (or a number of similar expressions whose meaning could be reduced to these three). Informants would normally insist that the defining characteristic of all three types of "non-relationships" is that they are "just sex", whereas "proper relationships" are more than just sex. However, in further discussion, some nuances within this concept became obvious. Longevity and repetition are the supposed attributes of "proper relationships"; however, informants noted that sometimes "flings" or "sex-friendships" last for relatively long periods of time. The centrality of sex persisted as the key defining characteristic of "non-relationships", but informants themselves would quickly dispute this idea, claiming that some forms (such as *fuck-friendship*) entail other activities beside sex; also, it fails as a defining characteristic because sex plays a very important (and sometimes central) role in "proper relationships" as well. Of course, we may resort to the evolutionary explanation of the two types of liaisons that would classify them as long- and short-term mating strategies, respectively. But what fails in this respect are the ideas of informants themselves. Only a small number of them see procreation as an element in any of their relationships; most of them, actually, practise some form of contraception as a planned method of not conceiving children – especially those who engage in "non-relationships". *Not a single person*, neither female nor male, said they would be happy to conceive, give birth to, or take care of, a child produced in this type of liaison.

What eventually did emerge as a key defining characteristic was the level of publicity of these relationships. "Non-relationships", regardless of their subtype, were almost exclusively kept private, i.e. secret and away from the public sphere. Even when there were close friends and family members who may have been aware of the existence of the relationship, it was never displayed in the public domain. Narratives, gestures and activities that are normal and constitutive for "proper" couples are mostly "out of bounds" for those who do not claim the status.

Pretty much in the same line, one of the key defining characteristics of relationships indeed was their visibility and public recognition. From the narrative basis, the right to refer to someone as "boyfriend/girlfriend/partner" and to be referred to in the same way, as well as to be recognized as a couple by other persons is essential to the existence of a relationship. To radicalize, romantic relationships – although normally considered very **private** – actually *do not exist outside the **public** domain.*

This being said, however, what decides whether a particular liaison would be relegated to the domains of public, official, "proper" relationships or remain in the mist of "non-relationships"? At first, my informants appeared a bit confused with this question. They "just know". "Perhaps not straight away, but...just know". However, in further conversation, they reveal a set of relatively fixed criteria they apply when selecting (potential) partners. Not surprisingly, many of the criteria converge.

Physical looks are, of course, mentioned (with the almost identical frequency among men and women in my sample), but it is straight away underlined that this is only a starting, or a trivial matter. The fact that informants agree that physical attraction is – for the most part – based on looks of the other person can be interpreted as supporting the evolutionary idea of the (subconscious) measurements and criteria we apply to other people as regards their parenthood potential. However, informants insist that this is far from being the determining criterion for/of a relationship: as has been said, physical attraction (based on looks) plays a crucial, if not only role in "one-night stands" as well. For a relationship, "a lot more" is needed.

This "lot" does, to some extent, include **emotional** and **personal characteristics**. Therefore, most of the informants mention – of course – mutual emotions, kindness, good-humouredness, gentleness, etc. But these characteristics remain second to more pronounced criteria concerning cultural choices.

The first and most obvious one is **education** and **profession**, or social status. Informants – being, most of them, highly educated and considered successful – want their partners to be on the same level (with gender variation in the terms of men sometimes wanting women who are slightly "beneath" them, or at least in a different profession; however – contrary to the postulates of evolutionary psychology – my women informants explicitly stated they would *not* like to be with men who are significantly wealthier, older etc; *cf.* also Holland and Eisenhart 1990). Of course, partners need not necessarily have the same degrees, work in similar fields or earn identical sums of money, but it is clearly understood that informants are generally looking for partners who belong to the same class. A much sharper indicator, however, follows when they, besides the former criteria, mention "background" or "**origin**". By this, they almost exclusively mean that their (prospective) partners (should) belong to old Belgrade families, or at least have been born in Belgrade; alternatively, Novi Sad, the third largest and second most affluent urban centre in Serbia, is an option. Of course, this form of pedigree is never only geographical or historical: it carries class and social capital. Therefore, being born "urbanites" in Belgrade means belonging to the citizenship, middle class and often intellectuals[2]. This class position carries certain values – and, more importantly, cultural choices. Being "an urbanite" means having a developed taste in music, literature, cinema, arts, cultural events etc; also developed political opinions that boil down to being open, democratic and cosmopolitan (for an elaboration of this classification, see Spasić 2006; Kronja 2006; Jansen 2005a). My informants mention and elaborate all of the above in detail. Everything that is not the above ends up being

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[2] "Intellectuals" has a very broad meaning in this context: the definition could be stretched to include almost everyone who had achieved higher education and has an affinity for works of art such as literature, painting or drama.

classified as "rural" – i.e. dirty, unwanted and polluting to the city, the "heart" of urbanity. These two categories – urban and rural – are seen as oppositional, and encompassing a very large number of items (see also Bakić-Hayden 2005). For example, music that is not "urban" (either classical, jazz or alternative – rock, pop, indie) is "rural" (e.g. turbo-folk) (Jansen 2005a, b; Kronja 2006).

Within the Serbian social context, this division has special significance. Although historically predating my informants' births, it was (once again) revoked with the break-up of Yugoslavia and the onset of the violent civil wars in the 1990s. This process was paralleled by a violent stratification of the constituent societies themselves. In Serbia, the division between the "war profiteers" and the civil opposition that did not participate in war nor support Milošević was such that it gave rise to the concept of "two Serbias" – the parallel coexistence of the same entity in two forms. One was the carrier of "European" values and traditions, high culture, democracy, cosmopolitism, human rights, modernism and progress, and was situated and personified in the hearts of urban centres. The other was everything that the regime stood for – nationalist, violent, conservative, patriarchal, authoritarian, isolationist and backward (see: Jansen 2005a, b; Gordy 1999; Group of authors 1992). The tensions between the "two Serbias" gradually evolved until the regime was brought down in 2000. Since then, the "second Serbia" – one that had been suppressed under the regime – took over. Or should have. Of course, as in all transitional countries, like the name suggests, the transition was not so smooth. The remains of the "old" groups and regime can still be seen everywhere. It became quite difficult to differentiate between the "true" representatives of "second Serbia" and the ones who only dressed and looked like them (Lazić and Cvejić 2006). Furthermore, the transitional process itself proved not to be as easy as was first thought. Instead of instant prosperity, my informants found themselves having to struggle for jobs, education and money despite the already privileged starting position they had because of being born into the middle class. Thus the acquisition of means by which they would be able to achieve "distinction" from the "others" (see Bourdieu 1998) got increasingly complicated. In this context, my informants invested heavily in learning to recognize distinction and achieving it for themselves, with the goal of maintaining or advancing their privileged class position.

Through the analysis of narratives deployed by a group of privileged young people in describing and evaluating their (and others') romantic relationships we come to the conclusion that this type of relationships serves, among other things, as a vehicle of social classification, stratification and distinction. Within the transitional context, it enables young people to identify and discriminate between the styles of life they want and those they don't. Speaking about criteria that define relationships, they list a number of behaviours and cultural products traditionally linked to the upper middle class (see Bourdieu 1998, 1984). Their own corre-

sponding values could be defined as progressive, modernist, pro-European and cosmopolitan. By achieving this identification, they confirm or upgrade their social positions (Lazić and Cvejić 2006). Romantic relationships, or at least the way they are being spoken about, represent a medium in this process.

From this point emerges an important and too often – for the romanticisation itself – overseen fact: romantic relationships, just like any other relationships, are a means of social classification and stratification. They enable the acquisition of what Bourdieu termed "social capital". In this sense, they are no different from the classical conception of marriage: though, perhaps, to a lesser extent, persons involved in relationships take very good care of how their choice of partners will be interpreted in their communities.

Conclusion

Analyzing the concepts of romantic relationships among the middle class, upwardly-mobile young urban population in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, we come to a number of important conclusions. One is that romantic love and relationships cannot only be explained as a consequence of historically-contingent processes that occurred in Western Europe around the Middle Ages and whose "spirit" or chief idea had trickled down to contemporary times and very different parts of the globe. Although I do not wish to dispute de Rougement's idea that the origin of the concept of romantic love may be historically and culturally specific, I have shown that this argument alone lacks the ability to explain the strength and prominence of this motive in people's narratives today.

As far as Giddens' concept of the "pure relationship" is concerned, it was very interesting to see how – and if – it could be applied to the narratives of people who inhabit a setting in which it is highly disputable whether it could be described as "Secondly Modern". It turned out that the concepts of romantic relationships among my informants do, in fact, reflect a specific form of social change occurring in the society they belong to. However, this has less to do with post- or second modernity, and more with transition. In a context in which the social roles of particular actors and relative power attributed to them are still in a process of meaning-making and remaking, my informants, who occupy a relatively high position in their society, struggle to maintain it. The context in which their struggle occurs is different from the one in which the most general form of their social identification in distinction, the "Second Serbia", had blossomed. The dictatorship and violent civil wars of the 1990s that allowed for clear social distinctions such as that between the "two Serbias" has disappeared, to be replaced with much more nuanced and sublime forms of social stratification and distinction. No more can the mere identification with democratic political values, preference for pop music, or going to the theatre or specific hang-

outs for the urban elite be considered enough. In the words of my informants, those physical and (more importantly) mental spaces have become "infested" with "Others" – those who are identified as carriers of identities and values my informants are opposed to. The chief problem, then, becomes discriminating between the "urban" guys and the rest, recognizing and keeping contact with those who match the sophisticated criteria for "us". This setting has an enormous influence on all social relationships; not least romantic ones. The narratives of my informants, then, resemble less a story of personal relationships and more a broad portrait or social critique of the society they belong to, or, more specifically, their own (projected) position and standing within it.

As far as the usefulness of evolutionary psychology in this context is concerned, one need not judge too prematurely. Of course, I would argue that many of the "classical" approaches and interpretive frameworks in evolutionary psychology fail to explain the rationale, reasons and choices my informants make concerning romantic relationships. Finally, what informants themselves claim is often directly opposed to the ideas of evolutionary psychology; of course, I am not saying that we need to skip all interpretation and practise anthropology as a longer form of journalism that only transmits what informants think or say, but I do think that informants' own concepts represent an informative source on the anthropological processes of understanding, conceptualizing and acting upon reality. Thus informants' choice and organization of narratives has reflected the struggle for the retaining and advancing of their own positions within the changing social context of transitional Serbia. Still, exactly this point fits an explanation from evolutionary psychology. Although the discipline has normally understood "evolution" and "survival" in quite primordial senses, perhaps it would not be too irrational to revise this. Namely, the world my informants inhabit is not the Pleistocene world in which predators abound and the survival of the species, even its particular members after reproduction, is insecure. Though perhaps not in line with the most developed societies of North America and Western Europe, their world represents a much more affluent and secure setting than the one inhabited by our ancestors. But still it is a world in which even my informants, who are relatively well off in comparison with the rest of the population, *struggle* for social and class prominence and resources, material or other. In this sense, their choice of partners, or at least the criteria presented on the narrative level, can be interpreted as an extension of this process. If individuals are attempting to retain or advance their position in a society, it makes a lot of sense to "mate" with other individuals who exhibit certain signs of belonging to the same or even slightly elevated social niche. Therefore the narratives of my informants that list very sophisticated criteria concerning the choice of music, places for going out, eating, dressing etc, as well as the more general markers of social distinction such as origin, profession or education can be interpreted as strategies for discrimination between the individuals "fit" for part-

ners and those who are not, in an increasingly complex society. In this case, the lack of actual mating desire would not an argument against this position; an individual's choice of partners influences that person's social status regardless of whether the partnership becomes lasting (and/or produces offspring) or not. Therefore, it is in the interest of individuals striving for social prominence to choose partners close to their social position throughout life; or, in the cases when they don't, to keep such partnerships away from the eye of the public – in other words, relegated to the domain of "one-night stands", "flings" and such.

It may seem a bit odd to link Marxist social theory focusing on the class reproduction of society with an evolutionary paradigm. In the end, the first does presuppose that differences are taught and maintained through a plethora of more or less sophisticated social and individual strategies and mechanisms, while the other sticks to the idea that some differences are inborn while others are irrelevant. However, in this case, I propose a departure from issues such as the origin of behaviour that have been a stone of contention between (to use a simplistic division) the more socially and more biologically oriented strands of sciences of man. What is at stake here is the explanation of the behaviour itself. When it comes to such an, actually, surprisingly wide-spread phenomenon such as the romantic relationship (see Dawkins 2007), one must take into account all explanations that different paradigms have to offer. Therefore, the marriage between the theory of social reproduction and evolutionary psychology does not seem so infeasible after all, at least in this case. Whether these odd bedfellows can produce viable offspring in other instances remains, naturally, an open question. But it is an invitation to debate. In the final instance, it demonstrates that what has been continuously envisaged as a struggle between paradigms can actually be a fruitful cooperation.

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Jana Baćević

Konceptualizacija "romantične veze"

Ovaj rad pristupa fenomenu romantičnih veza iz uglova nekoliko prominentnih paradigmi u savremenim društvenim naukama. Njihovi pristupi interpretaciji ovog fenomena primenjeni su, zatim, na "model" romantične veze apstrahovan iz intervjua prikupljenih tokom istraživanja konstrukcije ovog koncepta u delu beogradske populacije. Tvrdim da ni jedan interpretativni okvir ne može u potpunosti da objasni ovaj fenomen, ali da njihova kombinacija pruža vrlo korisne uvide. Ovo predstavlja primer načina na koji različite paradigme u društvenim naukama mogu biti kombinovane kako bi bolje objasnile fenomen, a ne suprotstavljane s ciljem međusobnog negiranja.

Ključne reči: romantična veza, romantična ljubav, "čista veza", društvene elite, društvena reprodukcija, tranzicija.

Jana Baćević

Conceptualisation de la "liaison romantique"

Ce travail étudie le phénomène des liaisons romantiques sous plusieurs angles à partir de quelques paradigmes fondamentaux dans les sciences humaines contemporaines. Leurs approches de l'interprétation de ce phénomène sont appliquées ensuite au "modèle" de la liaison romantique, basé sur des interviews recueillies dans une partie de la population belgradoise au cours de l'élaboration de ce concept. Je soutiens qu'aucun cadre interprétatif ne peut complètement expliquer ce phénomène, mais que leur combinaison offre de très utiles aperçus. Cela représente un exemple de la manière dont différents paradigmes dans les sciences humaines peuvent être combinés pour mieux expliquer le phénomène, et non opposés dans le but de se réfuter mutuellement.

Mots-clés: liaison romantique, amour romantique, "liaison pure", élites sociales, reproduction sociale, transition.