prior unconscious, chemical, and evolutionary mechanisms, science reduces the capacity to turn love into a mythology, a transcendent force of its own.

Political Emancipation as Rationalization

As the examples provided above suggest, self-sacrifice, self-abandonment, and the capacity to love with no expectation of reciprocity were seen as mostly (although not exclusively) female attributes. One of the main changes in the motif of self-sacrifice was brought about by feminism, understood as a broad cultural persuasion which extended human rights to women and debunked the social and ideological mechanisms that made the disenfranchisement of women possible, invisible, and widely desired. Other sources of the cultural rationalization of love are the norms of equality, consensuality, and reciprocity – contractualism – that have come to dominate the moral vocabulary of our polities and transformed the terms within which heterosexual relationships are negotiated. In his *Politics of Authenticity*, Marshall Berman suggests that “it is only in modern times that men [sic] have come to think of the self as a distinctly political problem.”

Given the gender used by Berman, it is ironic that this sentence is particularly and spectacularly applicable to women in the twentieth century. Indeed, feminism has exerted perhaps the single most significant influence on women's subjectivity and on the relations between the sexes. Second-wave feminism profoundly transformed the understanding and practice of the emotion of love. More than any other political and cultural formation, the feminist persuasion has importantly influenced the cultural history of love because it has torn away the veils of male chivalry and feminine mystique. Precisely because it has had such a decisive influence, I want to take stock of the impact of the feminist movement on romantic relations and ask what may have been the cultural impact of feminist modes of thinking in a society that is still largely dominated by men. In doing so, I view feminism as a cultural worldview: that is, as a new way of conceiving of the self and its relationships to others. This implies that I bracket and suspend, temporarily, my own obvious allegiance to feminism in order to understand its impact in destabilizing traditional gender roles and norms through critique and its egalitarian vision of women's and men's rights and duties. Because feminism, along with clinical psychology and consumer culture, has been the most powerful cultural agent shaping and changing the relationships between men and women, it can and should be analyzed like these other two cultural formations.

In her *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone argues that romantic love not only hides class and sex segregation, but, more importantly, it enables, perpetuates, and strengthens it. In Firestone's words, “[L]ove, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today.” Romantic love has come to be viewed not only as a cultural practice reproducing gender inequality, but also as one of the primary mechanisms through which women are made to accept (and “love”) their submission to men. The central concept that has enabled feminism to deconstruct sex and love is the notion of power. In the feminist worldview, power is the invisible, yet highly tangible dimension organizing gender relations, that which must be tracked down and expelled from intimate relationships. “Power” has assumed the status of explaining most of what has been wrong in men's and women's interactions. It is a cultural frame which conceives, and thereby reorganizes and generates social relationships. When viewed as a cultural script which – like the cultural script of “caste” or “blue blood” – organizes and regulates sexual and gender relationships, “power symmetry” can be said to rationalize social bonds in a number of ways. First, it invites men and women to reflect on the rules which organize the routine, taken-for-granted, course of sexual attraction (a routine shaped by centuries-old norms of patriarchal domination) and to monitor reflexively their emotions, language, and conduct. Second, in order to instill symmetry, it invites women to evaluate and measure their own and their partner's contributions to the relationship. Third, it trumps erotic relationships with the values of fairness in the workplace and the polity (the professional status of potential lovers must trump their private desires as individuals). And finally, it calls for a subsuming of erotic relations within neutral procedural rules of speech and conduct, which disembed relations from their particularity and concreteness.

De-Routinizing Power

Perhaps the most visible arena in which the principles of symmetry are exercised is the realm of courtship and sexual initiative. The most conspicuous example of the new principle of organization of intimate relations along the axis of symmetry is to be found in the category of sexual harassment, a very good example of the principle of equivalence of power-free and emotionally symmetrical relationships. For example, consider the case of Dave Cass and Claudia Satchel: the former a Professor of Economics at the University of Pennsylvania,
and the latter a graduate student. They had been together for five years when in 1994 Cass’s appointment to Chair of Graduate Studies was denied on the grounds that his relationship with a student made him unsuitable for this position. In reporting with disapproval on the university prosecution, Barry Dank explains:

They were in multiple violation of the feminist norms on asymmetrical intimate relationships. These norms hold that it is inappropriate for persons to become intimately involved when there is a significant power differential between the two parties to the relationship. In this framework, asymmetrical relationships represent abuse and make consent suspect and even impossible while symmetrical relationships are viewed as representing equality, and freedom of choice. Dave and Claudia were in a multiple asymmetric relationship since they were in age-differentiated categories – Dave being about 25 years older than Claudia, as well as being in power-differentiated positions in the university, Dave being a professor and Claudia a student.77

The cultural/political categories of equality and symmetry – which here conflict with other principles such as freedom of sentiment and privacy – constitute new ways of regulating gender relationships, by making them accountable to new norms of power symmetry and balance.

This entails fresh ways of conceiving the very categories that constitute a sexual bond between two people, for it demands that a concrete interaction be subsumed under an evaluation of a person’s abstract position in a social structure. J.M. Coetzee’s famous novel *Disgrace* (1999), quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, tells the story of a teacher, Professor Lurie, who has an intense affair with one of his students. As a result of this affair, he undergoes a disciplinary procedure at his college and is forced to resign. Lurie embodies a male character who does not understand the new rules regulating relationships between men and women. This is the exchange he has with one of his colleagues:

“Don’t you think,” says Swarts, “that by its nature academic life must call for certain sacrifices? That for the good of the whole we have to deny ourselves certain gratifications?”

“You have in mind a ban on intimacy across the generations?”

“No, not necessarily. But as teachers we occupy positions of power. Perhaps a ban on mixing power relations with sexual relations. Which, I sense, is what was going on in this case. Or extreme caution.”

Frodia Rassool intervenes. “[...] Yes, he says, he is guilty; but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part.”18

This vignette illustrates the semantic shifts from “irresistible impulse” to the political (and psychological) notion of “abuse,” from love for younger people to “intimacy across the generations,” from the definition of masculinity as social authority to a prohibition of “mixing power relations with sexual relations,” and from the experience of “private pleasure” to the suspicion that it hides a “long history of exploitation.” The individual and his/her desires become the bearers of an abstract structure of power which in turn justifies institutional intervention. Along with the language of psychology, feminism has helped enforce norms and procedures to ensure fairness, equality, emotional equity, and symmetry, institutionally and emotionally.

**When the Workplace Trumps Feelings**

Sexual harassment policies were aimed at protecting women from the abuse of institutional power by men. Sociologically, this had the effect of making the rules of fairness in the workplace trump the private desires of individuals. For example, the policy guidelines of Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) state that:

HGSE affirms the value of close, caring relationships between members of the HGSE community. At the same time, special questions are raised where one person has direct professional responsibility for another – as a faculty member or teaching fellow does for a student he or she teaches or advises, a supervisor has for a supervisee, or administrators or faculty members may have for one another. In this situation, any romantic relationship is inherently asymmetrical because it involves one person who, by virtue of his or her role within the HGSE community, holds formal power over the other. Because of this power imbalance, such relationships hold potential for exploitation. Such a relationship can also affect other members of the community, who may believe that someone in authority is open to unfair influence, that someone is receiving unfair advantages, or that the romantic relationship puts third parties at a disadvantage academically or professionally. Such assumptions can have detrimental effects even if they are untrue.19

Fairness toward the general community of workers must take precedence over individual sentiments, which suggests that the workplace ought to trump the autonomy of erotic relationships. Here, clearly, the workplace takes precedence over private sentiments.
Proceduralism and Neutral Language

The implementation of rules of fairness demanded the use of a neutral language, for neutrality was supposed to purify language of its gender biases and most crucially it was supposed to expose and thus counter the unspoken and invisible assumptions with which men and women have traditionally produced and reproduced their identities and aspirations. For example, consider the University of Pennsylvania student guidelines on sexual harassment, geared to men and women with different power as well as to students with similar power status:

GENERAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Can I compliment one of my students or coworkers?

Yes, as long as your compliments are free from sexual undertones. Compliments such as “Nice legs” or “You look really sexy in that outfit” can make your co-worker or student feel uncomfortable or threatened. Even if the person you’re complimenting isn’t bothered by the comments, others might be.

How about asking for a date? Do I have to take “no” for an answer?

You may want to get together socially with someone, from work or from your class, whom you find attractive. This is perfectly acceptable as long as you make sure the desire and attraction are mutual. If you are turned down for a date, you might want to ask the person if a request would be welcome at another time. Be aware, though, that some people don’t feel comfortable saying no to that type of question, for fear of offending you, or provoking some type of retaliation. Use your judgment. If the person says no more than once, or is uncomfortable or evasive when you ask, don’t use pressure. Accept the answer and move on.40

These instructions aim at instilling emotional self-regulation so as to remove the possibility of discomfort in another person. These emotional self-regulations thus end up creating comfort zones around neutral modes of interaction, characterized by emotionally neutral, sex-free and gender-free, language. The ill-described “politically correct” language is thus primarily a dis-embedding technique: that is, a linguistic and procedural tool that disrupts the non-conscious rules governing gender relationships and emotions, in order to substitute for them non-contextual, general, and procedural rules of interaction. A famous example of the ways in which rules of consent, symmetry, and reciprocity must now regulate relationships can be found in the Antioch rules, named after the American college in which they originated. In 1990 a feminist group at the college requested that the administration institute a sexual consent policy binding upon all its students. *Newsweek* magazine derisively summarized the purpose of the Sexual Offense Policy as

to empower these students to become equal partners when it comes to mate with males. The goal is 100 percent consensual sex, and it works like this: it isn't enough to ask someone if she'd like to have sex, as an Antioch women's center advocate told a group of incoming freshmen this fall. You must obtain consent every step of the way. "If you want to take her blouse off, you have to ask. If you want to touch her breast, you have to ask. If you want to move your hand down to her genitals, you have to ask. If you want to put your finger inside her, you have to ask."41

What the article derides is the fact that these rules aim at ensuring procedural equality between partners, and thus end up explicitly engineering erotic encounters by an act of political will. Judged from an erotic standpoint, these rules seem to eliminate the tacit ambivalence and spontaneity that normally attend sexual transactions. But the rules also inaugurate new ways of conceiving and marking political will, much like those that emerged during the French Revolution which citizens used to conspicuously fashion, signal, and constitute a new social contract.42 Such acts of explicit political will stand in contrast to traditional codes and symbols of love, which, because they are not explicitly formulated, seem to be more spontaneous and natural. Spontaneity, however, is indeed nothing but an effect of both the force and the invisibility of social scripts.

New Principles of Equivalence

Intimacy thus conceived entails new modes of evaluating relationships. In particular, it provides new principles by which sentiments are reconceptualized as contributions that can be evaluated, measured, and compared. It introduces what sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot called new "principles of equivalence": that is, new ways of evaluating an action according to a principle which implicitly organizes objects by grouping them together with others, differentiates them from others, and assigns to them a value, or ranks them.43 Fairness constituted a new principle of equivalence within romantic and domestic bonds: that is, a new way of introducing a form of metrics by which contributions and sentiments could be evaluated and compared. This principle of equivalence revolved
around two objects of evaluation. The most obvious domain that seems easily amenable to this principle of equivalence is that of practical chores and responsibilities. The principle of fairness addressed the question of whether there is an equal distribution of domestic chores: child rearing, house cleaning, and shopping. For example, an Internet site called Sharing Housework states that

it’s important to look at the overall life balance when determining who should handle each household task, including how many hours each person spends working outside the home, rendering to children, paying the bills or shopping for the family. […] When it comes to tallying up and keeping track of who does what, some couples might benefit from using a checklist or spreadsheet.44

Clearly, the norm of fairness introduces new ways of evaluating, measuring, and comparing the actions of members of a couple in daily life.

But the most striking illustration of the process of introducing new principles of equivalence is in the far more intangible realm of emotions. While contributions to the household sometimes can be translated into material and measurable components, emotions seem far less amenable to quantification. Yet, despite their intangible character, they have also become the object of principles of equivalence. Domestic and romantic transactions are organized around principles of equivalence and cognitive axes such as “emotional availability,” “emotional expressiveness,” “emotional investment” – of who invests more energy to keep the relationship alive, whether both parties’ emotional needs are adequately expressed and met. Principles of equivalence demand that we compare quantities, that we order and prioritize them, thus enabling a process of evaluating and ranking of emotions. For example, in a book entitled Lose that Loser and Find the Right Guy, the author declares: “Remember: Mr Right should care just as much about you as he does about himself.”45 Clearly, to be able to compare the care for oneself and for another requires the mobilization of cognitive tools to evaluate and measure “care.” Another example is Lara, a 40-year-old woman with two children, who explains her decision to initiate her recent divorce:

My husband is in many ways the ideal husband, responsible, handsome, great father, but he never was as warm to me as I wanted him to. During all these years, I kept telling myself I should not try to compare my and his warmth, my and his love, but in the end, I just couldn’t. I had everything, and yet he gave me so much less than I wanted, in the end I left.

The implicit norm of emotional symmetry compelled her to seek a divorce.

The demystification of love by political ideals of equality and fairness, by science and technology, has made sexual relationships into a self-reflexive object of scrutiny and control through formal and predictable procedures. The belief that language should be neutral and purged of its gender biases, that sexual relationships should be free from the long shadow of power, that mutual consent and reciprocity should be at the heart of intimate relationships, and, finally, that impersonal procedures should secure such consent have all had the effect of increasingly subsuming the erotic and romantic experience of love under systematic rules of conduct and abstract categories. Giddens, as we saw in chapter 1, captured these transformations under the glib term of “pure relationship” – a contractual relationship entered and exited at will.46 Yet, he omitted to grasp the ways in which a pure relationship reflects a rationalization of intimate bonds, and transforms the very nature of desire.

Technologies of Choice

The third cultural force that has contributed to the processes of love’s rationalization is to be found in the intensification of technologies of choice, embodied in the Internet. These technologies overlap with and rely heavily on psychological knowledge – a non-artifact-centered technology of choice – and modes of partner selection that derive from the market.47 That the choice of a mate has become far more rational has often been overlooked, because of the common view that mate selection based on love has entailed a concomitant decrease in the rational criteria involved. In contrast, I would argue counter-intuitively that both love and rationality jointly structure modern relationships and that both love and rationality have become rationalized.

To clarify what is rational about the modern choice of a mate, I would ask: what was the pre-modern rationality in the choice of a mate? A pre-modern actor looking for a mate was notoriously rational: she typically considered the criteria of dowry size, personal or family wealth and reputation, education and family politics (although from the eighteenth century onward, emotional considerations clearly played an increasingly explicit role in many European countries).48 But what is often omitted from these discussions is the observation that the calculation stopped here. Given the limited options, beyond the general and rudimentary requirements of character and