

Reading sex, sexuality and sexiness in contemporary capitalist societies

Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz, *What is sexual capital?*, Polity, 2022, viii+144 pp.

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Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz's *What is sexual capital?* is a clearly written, "accessible" book which leverages previous work by the two authors, and other sociological and feminist literature, to make knowledge about sex and sexuality in contemporary capitalist societies available also beyond academic circles. The care the authors take to define employed concepts is admirable: the short Chapter 3, itself titled "What is sexual capital?", discusses sex, capital, and sexual capital. The book's key notion of neoliberal sexual capital is clearly presented since the first pages, although deepened throughout the volume.

It is also since its start that the book distinguishes sexual capital from Hakim's "erotic capital", which Kaplan and Illouz criticise along agreeable lines and joining previous critical readings (e.g., Sassatelli, 2013, in introducing the Italian edition of Illouz's *Why love hurts*; cf. also Bassetti, 2013; Green, 2013). This is a relevant distinction for two reasons. First, and obviously, for the semantic terrain the sexual and the erotic share. Second, because "capital" is the actual core of the concept explored in the book. "Through the lens of capital", in fact, the authors "offer a detailed analysis of the effects of neoliberal capitalism on sex and sexuality" (p. 4). Capital is also what builds up to the historical dimension of the analysis, a dimension which is missing in Hakim's "asociological" (Green, 2013) theory:

For a full-fledge sexual capital to emerge, sexuality needs to autonomize itself vis-à-vis religion [...] the loosening of the norms and taboos that regulate sexuality, along with the increasing incorporation of sexuality in the economic field. When sexuality becomes structured by economic strategies, yields economic advantages, and becomes key to the

economic sphere itself, we speak of sexual capital organized in a neoliberal culture, or neoliberal sexual capital. (pp. 5-6)

This longitudinal perspective makes sexual capital much more useful than erotic capital as a sociological concept —or "metaphor", as the authors call it at the very beginning (the introductory Chapter 1 is titled "Sex and Sociological Metaphors").

Kaplan and Illouz also properly consider the unequal distribution of sexual capital, a property which again descends from capital being the main conceptual component of the metaphor (cf. pp. 38-39). Following Bourdieu's field theory and Thévenot's (2015) call for extending the notion of capital, the authors propose "an expanded capital-based approach [...] to reveal the ways in which sexualities and inequalities are currently linked together" (p. 32). The book does not dwell deep in Bourdieu's work, and could have done better in distinguishing his conception of social and cultural capital from that of human capital, which comes from a different research tradition, that Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) contributed to criticise. However, the authors' discussion of sexual capital is clearly grounded in a sound knowledge of Bourdieu's theoretical framework¹, differently from Hakim's superficial reading of it (cf. Bassetti, 2013). Accordingly, inequality and social stratification are taken seriously in the book, which considers gender and sexual orientations (or "minorities", p. 10)² but mostly focuses on class. Let me also mention that Kaplan and Illouz's analysis — particularly when discussing the role of sexual capital for the creative middle-class (pp. 96-108), that is their most original contribution— owns to the Bourdieusian concept and theory of habitus (although that is not explicitly acknowledged)³. Towards the very end of the book, and coming back to Hakim, the authors write:

Unlike in her [Hakim's] approach [...] we believe that owners of sexual capital do not simply strategize in order to augment their capital or cash in on it in the job market. Employable sexual capital is not utilitarian. Rather, what motivates one to accrue it to use is not an interested behavior but habituation instilled by class dispositions. (p. 103)

¹ Illouz (2008) herself leveraged Bourdieu's field theory to develop the concept of emotional capital.

² In line with their reading from neoliberal capitalism, and admittedly, Kaplan and Illouz consider literature on "sexual citizenship" only in terms of the *commodification* of LGBTQ+ instances and identities, quoting for instance Puar's "homonationalism" (p. 13). For the rest, they explicitly maintain a focus on heterosexuality.

³ I was also surprised that the authors' discussion of "embodied sexual capital" is not connected to a theory of habitus as embodied dispositions *and* skills.

This helps distinguishing the proposed approach also from that of human capital, as the former does not "assume [...] a rational actor" (p. 105, cf. also pp. 57-58). Moreover, the habitual (vs. utilitarian) nature of such sexual capital entails a "connection between the private sphere of sexual experience and the public occupational sphere" (p. 90), which is proposed as a topic for future empirical research (cf. further).

Another relevant contribution of the book concerns the role of singularity in contemporary capitalist societies, which underlies the discussion about identities, subjectivation processes and what Paul Beatrix Preciado —quoted in the opening by Kaplan and Illouz— has expressed as "the invention of a subject" to the benefit of the "pharmacopornographic" complex. The thesis, in short, is the following: with the "gradual autonomization of sex", "[m]odern sexuality is characterized by a dual process: sex becomes razionalized and objectified in scientific bodies of knowledge; and sex becomes a personal attribute, an identity" (p. 26, *passim*). Drawing from classical sociological theory (e.g., Weber, Foucault) and Illouz's (2012) previous analysis, Chapter 2 briefly discusses how modern sexual liberation(s) paved the way to serve capitalism even better than earlier "repressive bourgeois morality" (p. 31). Later in the oeuvre, Kaplan and Illouz illustrate how that is the case: with self-identities becoming means of production (as Lisa Adkins noted), and sex and sexuality means for *performing* singularity (pp. 98-99), thereby fostering consumption of sex-related commodities. Singularity is understood as the key figure of neoliberal culture (pp. 18 ss.), and the book shows how "sex has become a significant part of the normal production of culture and self" (p. 88) and thus what sexuality offers to the construction of (middle-class) identities which are well received in the contemporary (creative) labour market.

A historical perspective characterises also the typology the authors propose in Chapter 4, the core (and largest part) of the book. They identify and discuss four "forms", or "categories" of sexual capital, acknowledging that such a typology "is partly historical, partly analytical" (p. 42). The categories are the following: (1) *sexual capital by default*, i.e. chastity and domesticity; (2) *sexual capital as surplus value of the body*, i.e. sex work; (3) *embodied sexual capital*, i.e. sexiness/attractiveness and sexual know-how; and (4) *neoliberal sexual capital*, pointing to the fact that in late modernity, "for many people, some sexual recreation may translate into a feeling of social competence, self-efficacy, and self-appreciation that can

in turn feed into a proactive and entrepreneurial stance sought by employers" (pp. 44-45). As mentioned, the categorisation is motley, but still useful. Historically, the excursus starts from early modernity, with its heavily gendered moral economy "producing well-adjust workers whose sexual desires are confined to the private sphere" (p. 107) and particularly, chaste women whose counterpart is the sex worker. Chastity, here, equals sexual capital in the marriage market, bourgeois and not; and, in full keeping with the reproductive/productive divide, "good domestic sex" is opposed to "bad commercial sex" (p. 49).⁴

The latter, i.e., category (2), "includes prostitution, pornography, and erotic dancing" (p. 64), with amateur porn, legal brothel, "soft" prostitution, and women-only clubs later coming into the picture (but the list goes on, cf. e.g. Plummer, 2007). This form of sexual capital plays out in its own market and related niches. Culturally, sex work, like chastity—as its properly dichotomous counterpart—, foregrounds/ed gender roles in a kind of semiotic quadrant (the sexually self-controlled man and the chaste woman vis-à-vis the sexually uncontrolled man and the feminine⁵ prostitute), and most importantly, it did and still does entail a gendered, i.e. differential moral order (being a sex worker of any sorts is a worst threat to one's reputation for women than men⁶). Kaplan and Illouz also underline how "regular service work", such as waitressing, has become more and more sexualised in late modernity (p. 74), with "increasingly blurring boundaries between sex work and so-called legitimate work in which the body functions as a sexual surface" (p. 73) and sexiness is monetised (pp. 91-92). They seem to see this as the counter-face of another recent development, i.e., what we could call sex-work-as-service-work. The latter claim is misleading, to me, with respect to its recency. There is a variegated history, in the Western world and beyond, of monetised activities entailing both "mechanical" (p. 66) sexual services and "emotional intelligence, people skills and even cultural capital" (p. 68)—think, e.g., of *hetaerae* in ancient Greece, or geishas (and earlier courtesans) in Japan.

⁴ It is to be mentioned that the authors' discussion of category (1) focuses mostly on (Victorian) England and English-speaking countries, with brief incursions into German-speaking contexts. Moreover, in underlining the role of religion in the valuation of chastity, the authors mention Christianity only, leaving out other monotheisms such as Judaism (cf. e.g., Plaskow and Christ, 1989; Dufour, 2000). Beyond recognised differences in the ways these religions conceive of chastity, it is difficult to avoid seeing commonalities in their contribution to the establishment of a patriarchal moral order and in their ambition to regulate the *whole* life of individuals—an ambition capitalism has then taken on.

⁵ I use "feminine" rather than "female" as I maintain a cultural lens here.

⁶ This also applies to employability beyond the sex industry, cf. p. 92.

The third category, embodied sexual capital, is conceived as including two dimensions, sexy bodies and know-how in sex, whose respective social visibility clearly differs to a large extent. Sexiness and aesthetic attractiveness constitute dimensions that apply to the body of women and men, whether they are sex workers, chaste and self-controlled people (in some times and places), or liberated autonomous subjects (in other times and places). To put it differently, the aesthetic dimension of the (sexual) body is ubiquitous. Indeed "'sex sells' not only within the sex industry itself" (p. 44). What the book offers, here, is a discussion of how bodily attractiveness "extends to the realm of relationships" (ibid.), or "relationship market" (Plummer, cit at p. 55), and is differently distributed, thereby making "sex consumers co-create big capital" (p. 87). Kaplan and Illouz leverage literature from the sexual fields approach —there are "local ranking systems" (p. 80), each with its "social organization of desire" (Martin and George, cit. at p. 76), and "some people may fall on the wayside of such markets" (p. 44)—, and then expand the approach in two ways. First, beyond utilitarianism, via a theory of habitus, as I mentioned. Second, to cover the advantages that sexual capital provides also outside specific sexual fields, in the broader society, entrenching with "gendered, raced, and classed" (p. 80) hierarchies, with "collective, classed schemes of valuation" (p. 88). In such a sexual and "sexual status" competition (e.g., pp. 3, 54, 75), "[c]onsumers nowadays purchase a whole panoply of sexual commodities" (p. 86, cf. also p. 16), ranging from sex toys, to plastic surgery, to self-help products⁷.

If such consumption have a direct role in the relationship market, it also enhances employability in labor markets which came to require "one-(wo)man brands" (p. 88). That is how the book moves to the fourth category and the core of its contribution: sexual capital produces other, "specifically neoliberal 'desirables'" of the subject than sexiness and sexual competence, "'such as autonomy, esteem and capacity for self-expression'" (Crompton, cit. in ibid.). The main component of this form of capital is the experiential dimension of sex, with the affectivity it brings in. Therefore, "beyond the monetization of sexiness in the workplace, how can sexual experiences be useful for employment?" (p. 89), the authors ask. As I mentioned, they suggest to empirically explore this in future research, and they theorise and propose four lines of inquiry.

⁷ The latter is an issue Illouz (2008) has previously explored.

First, it "could be that sex increases self-esteem, [...hence] self-confidence, which in turn projects competence" (p. 90). Kaplan (2016) found similar dynamics in the Israeli creative middle-class. The second direction hypothesises that sexuality expresses some kind of domination. Illouz (2019) found some evidence in the heterosexual one-night stand "format" (one of the two forms of "unloving", in her theory). Third, "sex may be a way to exercise social competence, [...] mastery of social skills" (p. 90), which can be easily transferred to the labour sphere. This, in my view, is the most convincing line of inquiry, especially when considering the following: it is particularly casual sex with strangers which allows to develop social skills, and that is the kind of encounter (although not "directly" sexual) which is typical of several sectors of contemporary (service) work and urban life more generally. Fourth and finally, "good sex leads to greater job satisfaction" (p. 91), as a recent study on domestic/marital sex has shown (Leavitt et al., cit. in *ibid.*). Here the questions would be, to me, whether casual sex too engenders such an outcome, and whether feeling desired and experiencing pleasure build up to satisfaction more generally, then spilling into the workplace, or specifically affects the labour sphere.⁸

In positing sexual experiences as the principal component of neoliberal sexual capital, Kaplan and Illouz emphasise how the latter is productive only "for those with a middle-class habitus" (p. 96) and maintain that sexual experiences "are not specifically gendered" (p. 92), and the same goes for "the ability to perform sexual autonomy [...] and to capitalize on it (pp. 95-96). Although I understand the emphasis on class, I would not rule out gender as I believe that, particularly when considering heterosexual relations as the authors do, autonomy is differently expressed, conceived, and socially (e)valuated when an attribute of women or men. The existence itself of the "figure of the sexually agentic, empowered 'alpha' (young) women" (p. 93) in contemporary cultural imaginary, whereas the (ageless) male counterpart is taken for granted, is a case in point.

Let me close with a (minor) critical remark concerning the understanding of bodily and embodied sexual capital that emerges from the book. Kaplan and Illouz envision only two "terrains of sexual action", namely "external attractiveness of a sexual body or the realm of intrinsic sexual experience" (p. 47). The adjective "external", particularly as opposed to "intrinsic", makes me think that the first terrain entails physical appearance and body

⁸ I would hypothesise a positive answer to the first question, and I would lean for the first option as for the second question.

decoration only, hence excluding the performing body, which has its own aesthetic dimension *and* its know-how; the second terrain, on the other hand, seems to point to (personal) experience and its affectivity more than embodied skills. The latter dimension, actually, is the least developed in the volume: it is briefly considered in terms of consuming self-help sexual products (to enhance ones' position in the relationship market); it is surprisingly not mentioned for sex workers; and most importantly, I would have expected a deeper discussion about (a) how sexual experience allows developing and putting to use sexual know-how, and (b) the latter's role in producing that sense of self-efficacy and -esteem which builds up to neoliberal sexual capital. To put it differently, although sexual skills are definitely embodied, they are not visible (nor knowable beforehand in the one-night stand), hence I would have discussed the matter (also) within the neoliberal category, in terms of the production of a Self.

That having being said, corporeality is not the main topic of the book, which constitutes an important contribution and accessible reading.

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