Probleem 5 = echtscheiding / part. scheuze (vignet A+B)

(Beck & Beck-Gernsheim)

3

FREE LOVE, FREE DIVORCE

The two sides of liberation

'Forever yours.' Romantic love is one of the pivots of our society, that delightful feeling of loving and being loved, taking us to the registry office, if not the altar, and helping us all through our lives, 'until death do us part', as the marriage vows put it. The statistics, however, tell another tale. Very many people live alone, and their numbers are rising; others live together without committing themselves and many couples get divorced. Torn between old ideals and attempts to find new solutions, the sexes veer back and forth in and out of togetherness. This has social as well as private consequences:

> So far no one has either considered or worked out what marital problems, misery and separation have cost and continue to cost the state in terms of effort, resources and cash. But even if there are no data available one can conclude that separation has become an economic problem that swallows up a not inconsiderable portion of the gross national product. (Jaeggi and Hollstein 1985: 36)

Individualization, as we can see in this case, always has two sides to it. When marriage turns from being the highly rigid and predetermined arrangement it was in pre-industrial society to being a voluntary union between two individuals, there are bound to be new kinds of irritations and struggles to cope with, however much each loves the other. Or to phrase it more dramatically, *when love finally wins it has to face all kinds of defeat.*

Precisely this is the paradox to be considered next. We shall trace how it came about and try to decode its inner logic, looking at the dynamics forcing people into an endless cycle of hoping, regretting and

despite everything trying all over again. None of this is mere coincidence; it is inherent in our modern world and in that ambiguous idea 'freedom'. The difficulties lie in the principle of free choice, which offers us new scope but also lands us with the responsibility for the results, good or bad.

The old days: obligations and certainties

As social historians have consistently shown, marriage in pre-industrial society was not so much the union of two people as of two families or even clans (Rosenbaum 1978, 1982; Schröter 1985; Sieder 1987; Stone 1978, 1979). Accordingly there was no choosing whom one married, in today's sense, no falling in love and following one's own intuitions. The radius of choice was restricted in advance by certain criteria such as status and property, race and religion, and marriage was arranged by a network of family, relatives and the local community. People seldom married for love; the main purpose was to contribute to the family's prosperity and survival as an economic unit, and having children as helping hands and heirs. The British nobility in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is a good example:

> The greatest parental pressure was necessarily exerted on the daughters, who were the more dependent and sheltered, were considered members of an inferior sex and who scarcely had any alternative to obedience since being unmarried was even less attractive than an undesirable husband . . . In the early sixteenth century, wills and marriage contracts in which small children were traded in advance like cattle were quite common in all classes and all regions . . . Freedom of choice was almost as limited for the sons as for the daughters. His wish to make use of his guardianship and the financial importance of the contract to prevent the marriage from slipping out of the family's control often prompted the father to marry off his son and heir during his own lifetime to a woman he had chosen. The son was usually under the father's sway because he was . . . financially dependent on him. (Stone 1978: 445–7)

Regulations of this kind contain of course a large element of coercion. The most obvious losers in the traditional marriage system are first of all those at an economic disadvantage – whether because of their position as sibling, their sex, or their lack of social standing. They cannot fit in with the economically determined rules of this system and are therefore excluded in advance from marrying by laws on inheritance, dowry requirements, prohibition on marriage for those without property

and the like. Others affected in a negative sense include men and women forced by the family to marry someone who seems suitable. The third group covers those who wish to marry but are forbidden to do so because their chosen partner is incompatible with the family's criteria, in other words the tragedy of 'love and intrigue' so often a theme of world literature:

> Two households, both alike in dignity . . .
> From ancient grudge break to new mutiny . . .
> From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
> A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
> Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
> Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.
> (William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue)

There can be no doubt that the traditional rules left little room for personal wishes, and forced them to be rigorously suppressed if the family's wishes differed. But there can also be no doubt that such rules gave marriage a certain stability and permanence. Where a union was arranged by the family and local community, those same persons had an interest in preserving it and could exert their influence via a whole range of social mechanisms. Where choosing a spouse depended on background and status there was a guarantee that in important respects men and women learned the customs and norms, shared the same expectations and understood the rules. Where men and women worked together on the family farm or in the family shop, they were welded together by their mutual efforts and by the setbacks and dangers they faced in their struggle against, say, a failed harvest or a cruel winter.

Imhof describes how it was for a peasant family:

> It was not the particular farm owner and his individual well-being which were decisive, but the well-being and standing of the farm itself; it was not the particular family living there at this or that time, but the succession of families, the lineage. Generation after generation revolved round this centre, farm owner after farm owner, but less as an individual than as someone fulfilling a role. It was an idea, a standard that was central, not an ego. (1984: 20)

Tania Blixen words the position of an aristocratic family in a similar way:

> The relationship between the spouses was no personal one, and strictly speaking they could not personally or directly bring happiness to or disappoint each other, but must mutually provide the greatest significance to one another through the relationship they occupied and the importance they had for their mutual tasks in life. For the duc de Rohan there could never be any comparison between his wife and other women; no matter how much more beautiful and gifted and attractive they might be, she still remained the only woman in the world who could give birth to a duc de Rohan. The receptions she held were receptions for the Rohans, and the peasants she supported were the Rohan's peasants and poor people. (1986: 67–8)

Modern times: more freedom, less security

According to the social historians married couples began to behave differently towards one another as agrarian society gave way to modern industrial society. The family clan lost a great deal of its influence, and the rights of those whose lifelong union was at stake were strengthened. 'It is people who choose one another, and no longer families which unite and ally' (Rosenmayr 1984: 113). Such choices were of course not just left to luck; especially during the early years of this change, criteria such as social background, personal estate, upbringing and religious denomination still played a decisive role (e.g. Borscheid 1986; Mayer 1985). Even romantic love keeps its hidden ties to social rules. But seen from the lovers' point of view the balance shifted over the centuries from being told what to do to being free to choose.

> Within the past thousand years ideas on proper match-making have passed through four successive phases. In the first phase marriage was arranged by the parents with little concern for their children's wishes; in the second the parents still prepared the ground but conceded veto power to their children; in the third the children made the choice but the parents could veto it, and in the final, fourth phase, reached only in this century, the children choose their spouses by themselves and do not much care what their parents think. (Stone 1978: 475)

So with the breakdown of the old order it looked as though something wonderful could be found: personal happiness quite untrammelled by outside duties or obligations. It was no longer a union between a man and a woman arranged by outsiders according to prescribed criteria but an intimate, deeply personal encounter between two committed individuals, triumphing over the barriers of class and status and recognizing only one authority – the language of the heart. The story was meant to turn out as beautifully as it does in fairy tales: 'and they lived happily ever after.'

> The morning breaks for me! O why could not
> Our fathers understand each other just
> As easily as we! . . .
> The fathers reconciled, I will make bold
> To claim thee as my own . . .
> Agnes, Agnes!
> What joy awaits us! Thou shalt be my wife.
> O canst thou grasp the measure of our joy?
> (Heinrich von Kleist, *Die Familie Schroffenstein*, V, 1)[1]

What has become of these high hopes? Many of them have been dashed. Life is very different from what fairy tales tell us. Psychologists note that 'the biggest problem people face in their private lives nowadays is how to get on with their partner' (Jaeggi and Hollstein 1985: back cover). Demographers scan the statistics and declare, 'Divorce activity is brisk' (Schmid 1989: 10). There is much talk of 'really relating', of 'talking it through', of 'throw-away loves'. The graver researchers speak of 'serial marriage' and 'monogamy in instalments'.

The situation is indeed paradoxical. Men and women no longer have to obey their families and are freer than ever before to decide for themselves whom they wish to marry (or not). One might have thought that in these circumstances sharing one's life with someone would prove easier and more satisfying, but in fact scores of people are fleeing from exactly this state.

In search of a shared world

One feature of modern life is that each of us has a huge number of often complex and contradictory options to choose from. Various factors play a role, and as time passes their effect becomes increasingly apparent: rapid social change with a whole range of new possibilities, the erosion of traditional ties, new kinds of social and geographic mobility. Someone born in the hills of rural Bavaria is quite likely to move to a city like Hamburg to study and work, spend holidays in Italy beside Lake Garda and plan to retire to Majorca.

This means that each of us has to achieve more than before to find our way through the intricacies of life and establish a sense of identity. Sociologists and psychologists confirm that our love-lives gain enormous significance from this fact; as described above, our view of reality and sense of self-esteem largely rest on how things are at home.

Not surprisingly this means a new kind of strain. If you are free to

choose your own partner and build up a world together outside the dictates of family, kinship or clan, this may look like freedom but actually demands a great deal of effort. In the new system the couple is not just expected but *has* to design its personalized life scheme. Berger and Kellner sketch the outlines of this task:

> Marriage and family used to be firmly anchored within a network of relationships linking them to the larger community . . . There were few barriers between the individual family's world and that of the outside community . . . One and the same social life pulsated through house, street and town. To put it in our terms, both the family and the marital relationship were embedded in a much broader network of contacts. In present-day society, by contrast, each family constitutes a segregated sub-world of its own, with its own exclusive rules and concerns.
>
> This fact places far more commitment on the couple's shoulders. In the past setting up a new marriage only meant adding a further variation to an already established social pattern, whereas nowadays couples have to face the often strenuous task of creating their own private world . . . The monogamous aspect of marriage makes investing in this undertaking particularly risky, for the success or failure of it depend on the idiosyncrasies of only two people and the barely predictable future development of these idiosyncrasies . . . according to Simmel the least stable of all social relationships . . . In a relationship which consists of only two people and depends on their efforts, both have to invest more and more in their own realm to counteract the lack of other relationships. This only increases the drama and risk involved. (1965: 225)

Furthermore the same centrifugal forces in society which turn marriage or a close relationship into a fixed star by which to steer one's biography make it very hard for both partners to agree on a common course. The two people who become one by signing the marriage contract (or even without doing so) tend much more than used to be the case to come from different backgrounds, even if they still often obey the laws of endogamy and choose a partner on conventional grounds (social standing, religion, nationality or race). In other words their life histories have provided them with different sets of priorities and hopes, ways of communicating and techniques for making decisions. It is hard work agreeing on a common project. Berger and Kellner comment on this:

> Marriage in our society is a dramatic event in which two strangers get together and redefine one another . . . the concept 'strangers' does not of course [mean here] that the candidates stem from very different social classes – in fact the data show the opposite is the case. The strangeness is rather because, unlike marriage candidates in previous social settings,

> they come from different 'face-to-face' areas. They have no past in common, even though their respective pasts were similarly structured. (1965: 223)

And one step further, if choosing one's own mate used to be primarily directed against the family's wishes, the principle of free choice acquires an updated meaning when the population becomes increasingly socially and geographically mobile. Even though the majority of couples still follow the old rules, there are many who step over local and national boundaries and choose someone quite different in social standing, religion or nationality (e.g. Mayer 1985; Schneider 1989). In Germany nowadays one marriage in twelve is of mixed nationality (Elschenbroich 1988: 364). Here it is particularly obvious that two 'strangers' are getting together. One especially important concern for them is finding how they can help each other to discover themselves, as our modern definition of love demands, although this must entail facing one's own past and roots.

Choosing a partner of a different background in these circumstances means uniting with a different culture, but it also means having to get involved with the fears and hopes, thinking patterns and horizons of an unfamiliar world. An American investigation into marriages between Jewish and non-Jewish partners came to the conclusion:

> Where man and woman share a common group background, a common cultural heritage, a general sense of social similarity, the confrontation with the past can remain a purely personal affair. What each reveals to the other are the personal and family secrets, so to speak. However, when man and woman do not share a common set of ground assumptions about their collective memories, the most minute aspects of self-expression become broad statements about one's cultural history – whether one likes it or not. (Mayer 1985: 70)

The marriages which step beyond the usual radius for choosing a partner show up in sharp relief how the modern person goes about finding a mate. They are a sign that outside influences have little say and that the decision rests with the two people involved. A study of bicultural marriages in Germany noted that they were 'in terms of attitude, very modern marriages; they correspond to the ideal of romantic love and are individualistic.' Furthermore, 'the romantic basis of this relationship is both an opportunity and a problem' (Elschenbroich 1988: 366). The opportunities can be outlined as follows:

> If things go well, if some of the early boldness, optimism and sense of experimenting is preserved, then bicultural marriages are particularly lively and interesting. If the problems posed by communicating across cultures can be integrated into the family, that can encourage a feeling of solidarity and give the family a wide horizon. (Ibid.)

There are, however, typical drawbacks. Part of the risk potential in such unions is that there are no external support systems which are binding for both partners. The job of keeping the marriage intact is left entirely to the couple, and is more difficult the further apart their two cultures are. While during the early stages differences usually recede into the background, and all that counts is being in love and agreeing with one another, in the course of the marriage the differences stemming from their separate worlds inevitably come to the surface and have to be faced; the dividing lines which seemed to have been wiped away in choosing a mate reveal their staying power as time goes on and have to be accepted and coped with by both partners. The American study on marriages between Jewish and non-Jewish people presents a theoretical picture of this predicament:

> While the nascent moments of falling in love evoke a feeling of an intense and lasting present, in which the past and the future are irrelevant, the maintenance of love seems to have the opposite requirement. It seems to call for the probing of the past and charting of the future. It also brings into its discourse the selfhood of the lovers, which inevitably implicates their cultural heritages. There is simply no self that is not linked in some fashion to an ancestry, a family network and a history . . . The intermarriage conversation is inevitably a conversation also about culture, history, and the personal feeling about tradition. (Mayer 1985: 72)

The German study on bicultural marriages traces the developmental patterns using empirical data:

> In . . . interviews bicultural couples described typical phases of their relationships. In the period of initial infatuation an effusive optimism prevails, a feeling of blissful openness, and . . . a certain pride in one's nonconformism. After going through internal and external strains there is often a phase of retreat and renewed identification with one's own background . . . People discover how firmly their own value systems are anchored, often for the first time. Without this confrontation their own value systems usually remain *inconspicuous*, unconscious – and for that reason appear to be very normal. (Elschenbroich 1988: 366–8; emphasis in the original)

In search of a common cause

Now that marriage has shaken off the ties and obligations it had in the days of the extended family, it seems to float along by itself, a sheltered, private place for emotional companionship and leisure. This means more freedom, but, seen in another light, less support from outside. The 'common cause' which held together generations of families has disappeared (Ostner and Pieper 1980) and instead the individuals involved have to negotiate their own common aims. 'The still "empty mould of privacy" must first . . . be filled with content' (ibid.: 120). No doubt this can mean a new closeness but it also harbours considerable risks.

What do you mean by love?

What is the basis of our companionship? At first sight the answer is easy: the modern definition states that we are together because we love each other, our companionship is above all an emotional one. This is of course a sweeping and vague definition, for the components of love have changed throughout history, in recent centuries and particularly over the recent past. At present there are several versions – traditional, modern and postmodern – which coexist as odd bedfellows. This 'non-simultaneity of the simultaneous' means that all sorts of notions, expectations and hopes, not to mention divergent rules and modes of behaviour, are combined in the term 'love' (see for instance the glib discussions on monogamy versus multiple relationships). Satisfying demands for 'love' is therefore a complicated and delicate matter of mediation and coordination, which can lead to fundamental misunderstandings:

> The common ground for a modern Western marriage, an 'identity shared by both partners', is normally continually being confirmed and renewed in conversation. Whether one verbalizes such matters, however, differs from culture to culture. The bourgeois Western manner of dealing with disagreements – talking about them and trying to understand – is by no means a universal need. If the German spouse of a foreign person insists on it, the method may prove completely futile. In some other cultures a close relationship is not considered a criterion for a 'good' marriage; what counts is rather relying on each other, sharing responsibilitiy and providing for the family, dividing up the labour between the sexes and practical staying power. (Elschenbroich 1988: 368)

There is another factor which further complicates matters: what we mean by 'love' subtly changes as time goes by even within our own

private relationships. This is especially true where 'romantic love' is seen as the ideal, for the initial phase is full of excitement and joy fed largely on the fascinating otherness of the other and the unknown. As the years pass, however, people inevitably get to know each other and everyday life sets in. This can mean a new sense of togetherness – durable, familiar, reliable – growing out of a shared history, but many couples cannot cope with the metamorphosis. It is neither luck nor fate but an integral part of this model; the 'trap of romantic love' means that love starts out as infatuation and lingers as an expectation which in this form cannot be met, so that all that is left is disappointment.

The American author Jeffrey Ullmann collected the enraptured effusions of prominent contemporaries in his book *Singles' Almanac* – as well as what remained of them later:

- Richard Burton on Elizabeth Taylor: 'Her body is a miracle of architecture.' Afterwards: 'She's too fat and her legs are too short.'
- Elizabeth Taylor on husband no. 1, Conrad Hilton Jr: 'He understands me as a woman and an actress.' Afterwards: 'After I married him I lost my rose-coloured spectacles – I lost weight and was only able to eat baby food.'
- Rita Hayworth on her third husband, Prince Ali Khan: 'My Prince of princes.' Afterwards: 'Ali can do whatever he wants – I've had it with him.' And on her fourth husband, Dick Haymes: 'I'd follow him anywhere on earth.' Afterwards: 'I don't know where he is – and I don't care.'

What perhaps most complicates the search for common ground is the fact that men and women have diverging views on what living with someone means. Men tend to emphasize the practical aspects like keeping the household running and 'making sure that everything goes well' (*Abendzeitung*, 23 October 1987). Women by contrast focus much more on the emotional side; for them sharing feelings and being close are paramount. This is exemplified in an interview with a husband and wife:

> MRS O: I often wish I could spend more time with my husband.
> MR O: Yes, but what does that mean in practical terms, what do you want to do when you are with your husband?
> MRS O: Well, just do something together.
> MR O: Do you want more in bed or something?
> MRS O: Just more overall – perhaps more conversation – or – you've got problems after all – sitting down together or, well, talking more

or chatting.

MR O: But about what? about what? . . . the paper, or work or what do you want to talk to me about, it's all crap, what do you want to talk about anyway?

MRS O: We have to talk to each other, about plans, and then here you come, right, if you speak up more, say more, then –

MR O: Well, what about plans, that's all a lot of crap, your stupid gabbing . . .

MRS O: Often I think to myself, you could, well you could ring up and so on and so forth.

MR O: Those days are over, because we only have one telephone, the one that's out of order . . . and besides, what is that anyway, that's all hot air; what comes of it, probably just blah, blah, blah, back and forth and how's the weather . . .

'MRS O: Well, oh dear, well but sometimes between us it's some kind of connection or something.[2]

The differences in what the sexes expect are probably not new, but their conflict potential only recently began to surface. As soon as women come to see themselves as autonomous people with wishes of their own they are less ready to accept the solutions offered by previous generations – adjusting to your husband, and sacrificing your own interests. Women used to be expected to dispense comfortable feelings, affection and warmth, and nowadays increasingly want to be the recipients of such feelings. They are becoming tired of being the peace-makers and soothers at home. This trend is unmistakable in best-selling women's literature, where renouncing love is recommended, or at least that sort of love which leaves women drained and exhausted: the diagnosis is 'Women who Love too Much' (Norwood 1985); that is why a new 'Emotional Compact' between the sexes is needed (Hite and Colleran 1989: 44f.). And if it isn't fulfilled? The sober conclusion is 'Don't give up everything for a man' (Hite and Colleran 1989).

Difficult decisions: too many options

Marriage in pre-industrial society was held together by the iron bands of a common cause, the family and its survival. Each spouse had a clearly outlined task and knew exactly what was expected of him/her. As soon as the family is no longer one large economic unit these rules no longer apply. The bourgeois family which succeeded it polarized the gender roles – the man was the bread-winner and the woman the heart of the family. In the waning years of the twentieth century even these

standard roles are becoming shaky. What is left is a great deal of scope for decision-making, as a glance into the German Code of Civil Law (BGB) shows (see our table).

Original version of the BGB of 1896, in force since 1 January 1900		Marital Law Reform Act of 1976, in force since 1 July 1977
§ 1354	The husband is entitled to make decisions in all matters concerning marital life; in particular, he decides on residence and housing.	nullified
§ 1355	The woman takes on the husband's name.	As married name the spouses can choose the name of the husband or the wife.
§ 1356	The wife . . . is entitled and obliged to run the shared household.	The spouses regulate the management of the household by mutual consent.

Certainly the fact that both partners are free to choose how to run their mutual home does much to counteract the notion that the woman's role is subordinate; both she and he can bring their own rights and interests to bear. But once again there are losses with the gains. What looks so simple on paper proves a bitter battlefield in ordinary life, with two people with their own ideas, plans and preferences struggling to find a common approach. There is no law of preordained marital harmony at work guaranteeing that they reach roughly the same conclusions. Put briefly, if you have more scope you may feel liberated from old restrictions but you also run the risk of differing in so many respects from your lover that life becomes one long argument. The agreement the legislators recommend is hard to achieve.

It is not rare for couples to wrangle over the choice of a family name long before they are married. (Of course, as the statistics show, it is usually the men who keep their names, but this says nothing about how many couples differ on the matter beforehand, or how many never get married for just this reason.) Deciding on where to live is a problem when a good job offer somewhere else turns up. And how to organize the daily shared routine, provided there is one, is the worst problem of all, a minefield of disappointments and frustrations which do not just affect the smooth running of the household but often stir up deep personal fears that one's role in life and self-esteem are under attack.

Men and women are currently 'exposed to a whole kaleidoscope of possible interpretations of what "man" or "woman", "love" or "relationship", "motherhood" or "fatherhood" still might or should mean' (Wehrspaun 1988: 165). The way the sexes respond to one another is a bewildering mixture of old habits and new starts, with confusion creeping into the most intimate corners. As someone daubed on a wall: 'We want to love each other, but we don't know how,' summing up the predicament.

Talking it through: love as homework

So what is to be done? If there are no external standards, we have to find internal ones. 'This new society is . . . condemned . . . to generate its own rules which make cooperating and surviving possible *and* to insist on obedience to them' (Weymann 1989: 6). It seems like a new version of old Münchhausen, pulling himself out of the swamp by his own pigtail, except that now this has to be done as a couple. In all events tuning in to each other's ideas is crucial, and there are signs of attempts to 'manage relationships via negotiation' (Swaan 1981). This is happening in a wordy world of winding paths and circular routes, where people bump into each other, sometimes stay together, often part but at least try to discuss what is happening. The results, especially in contemporary literature, fill the bookshelves; literature is no longer 'a discourse on love but at best a discourse on a discourse about love' (Hage 1987). As an illustration, here is the monologue by a man in the thick of it:

> Presumably everybody gets the kind of lover he deserves. I've got Anna and the two of us have been together for five years now. In that period of time others have acquired a shared apartment or at least a child. Not us. Each of us does his own thing – to each his own: bed, telephone bill, car, washing machine – the modalities of our relationship simply aren't cleared up yet. Who worries about what, who plays which role. Is living with someone ever compatible with independence? We still have to work a lot of things out. We're not a proper couple yet, even though a lot of people think we are. But we constantly rack our brains over whether we should become one. The only thing we've really achieved over the past years is a lot of good arguments – we live with them. If I criticize Anna's desire to sit around every night in pubs, she accuses me of possessiveness. If she wants to go on holiday alone and regards my idea of spending the summer together in Tuscany as just a pseudo-romantic impulse, she says I am suffering from childish fears of losing her . . . It seems to me as if our relationship consists of nothing but arrangements – emotional clauses in a screwing contract with an extraordinary amount of small print . . . I always tell myself, don't get upset because she again refused to spend the night with you. She always says, 'I just need time for myself. You wouldn't enjoy being with me anyway when I'm brooding like this.' But what matters to me is just being with her. She doesn't understand that. 'It stifles me,' she says. 'Why don't you two just get married?' a friend asked me the other day, 'It's crazy to burden yourselves with two households for years and years.' That might be true. But I read somewhere that the average couple spends only eight minutes a day talking to each other after twenty years. Something like that could never happen to us. (Praschl 1988)

To an outsider the interminable talk about how to treat one another may seem ridiculous, but it is not just a symptom of personal confusion or a kind of ego virus infecting more and more of the population; such an interpretation would be tempting but superficial. What is happening in so many private lives is to a large extent the consequence of modern thinking.

As long as there were strict commandments and prohibitions regulating married life and the daily routine, it was fairly obvious to everyone what was correct, pleasing to God and natural. Why bother with big words, complicated questions and long explanations? Each spouse knew the rules and also knew that the other one knew them. (Even those who chose to disobey knew what they were doing: they were violating custom and moral attitudes and rebelling against the norms.) In this respect there has been a fundamental transformation in recent decades, and especially in recent years. The fewer firm regulations there are, the more we are expected to work them out for ourselves, asking 'What's right and what's wrong?' and 'What do you want and what do I want?' and 'What should we do?'

'A modern couple – lots of words and not much loving' (Hage 1987). Couples have to get involved in a continuing dialogue so that they can invent and pursue their common cause, that is to say, they have to fill up their free private space with compatible definitions of love and marriage. This requires enormous effort, time and patience, exactly the qualities identified with 'relationship work'. And it is very hard work, and often seems almost in vain, for beyond every agreement there lies yet another argument to tackle:

> If the individual is not to fail, he must do something to maintain his happiness. Family claims put high expectations on him. Being a 'good partner' means being active, attentive, and empathic. Rifts in opinions have to be recognized early, while they are still just hairline cracks. Patching them up requires sensitive perception of one's partner's needs. (Vollmer 1986: 217)

In the absence of outside authorities it is increasingly important that the couple finds ways of communicating with one another. It is therefore certainly no coincidence that there has been a boom in all branches of psychology and therapy since the 1960s, focusing particularly on the dynamics of love. The imperatives they often proclaim are called 'openness' and 'honesty'. The partners are supposed to admit their feelings, 'be themselves' and not hide behind anxieties, taboos and conventions. A self-help book published in 1970 states:

> We are firmly convinced that . . . the real problems of true love can only be solved in relationships which are open, free, critical and authentic, that is, which give both partners the chance to start out from themselves and offer themselves to their partner without having to distort themselves or fit in with the other's expectations. (Quoted in Bach and Deutsch 1979: 26)

Being open, which is a byproduct of how people behave when no longer bound by old commitments, has suddenly become a watchword, signalling the advent of a new culture. Pop culture transmits it in trivialized form, the mass media dilute it, but the tendency especially among young people is to tell all. Men and women go through hours of heart-searching either to get closer to one another or to reject one another. Every feeling, every move is dredged up, scrutinized, defined and catalogued – my anxieties, your clinging, his father complex. 'The partners start out from the assumption that they have to be authentic, must not be hypocritical and must learn to get along together while being uninhibitedly frank with one another' (Hahn 1988: 179).

The results are not always particularly helpful to the relationship. Not only lying but insisting on the truth can prove destructive. And self-examination is not just a way of escaping from the sins of the fathers (and mothers) but also a dangerous weapon. 'Let there be truth between us,' says Thoas to Iphigenia in Goethe's drama *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (loosely based on Euripides), but only after they have separated forever. The relative success of traditional modes of self-examination such as religious confession or psychoanalysis has a lot to do with the fact that the priest or analyst is not living with the confessee or patient (Hahn 1988: 179).

The ethics of change: getting it all right

As we have described, one of the essential features of modern life is that we have shrugged off the traditional order. It is striking that once this process gets under way, there is little stopping it and a 'drive to expand', indeed a permanent 'ethics of change', is set in motion (J. Berger 1986: 90–1; Wehrspaun 1988). The old barriers stopping people – the laws of nature, God's word, social customs and class imperatives – are gradually wearing away and as a result there are no rules stating when we have to desist. Instead it becomes the norm to look for more: even faster, bigger, more beautiful!

This 'improving' mentality extends far beyond makes of cars and job conditions; it also intrudes into love-affairs. Research has shown that the standards set on living together today are considerably higher than they used to be. It is no longer enough to just get along with each other. People want more, they are in search of 'happiness and fulfilment', the American dream, 'the pursuit of happiness' in their own little home. Disappointments are inevitable, for the higher the expectations one brings to marriage, the more likely one's own seems drab compared with these grand ambitions. Furthermore the dream turns into a trap, arousing hopes which cannot be satisfied. In any close and lasting live-in relationship there will be angry, disillusioned or guilt-ridden moments to augment the happy ones. As a pupil wrote in an essay, 'family is war and peace' (quoted by Lüscher 1987: 23). Expecting to be happy, and only that, collides with the realities of personal relations, the conflicts, compromises and crises which crop up in all our doings with one another. An experienced therapist puts it like this:

> [The countless books on marriage which recommend personal growth and promise maturity deal] not at all or too little with the other side, which is also a part of growth, the depths of distress and destructive violence and efforts to overcome them. [I] do not [see] the family as a sanctuary, a place where nothing but fun and joy prevail – which of course it can be – but as a place where the human being, the most barbaric creature of all, can learn to share time and space with others in a non-violent and non-destructive way . . . Revealing oneself completely to the person with whom one lives and at the same time getting to know sides of his (her) personality, history, hopes and fears which smash the image one has made into a thousand pieces . . . is a long-drawn-out and very painful experience . . . [In this sense] marriage and family life are wonderful places . . . to face life's cesspits.
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> So I have reached the conclusion after twenty-six-and-a-half years of married life that happiness is not the goal. Marriage has many wonderful sides; it is a place where one can learn to share life with people who are different in age as well as gender, values and perspectives . . . It is a place where one can hate as well as conquer hate, a place where one can learn to laugh and love and communicate. (Jourard 1982: 177–9)

What is one to do, however, if reality does not live up to the ideal? According to the old model people were tied to one another no matter

how incompatible their temperaments and inclinations turned out to be. Now the new belief in improving the situation points in exactly the opposite direction – it's better to end the marriage than put up with shortcomings and tone down one's expectations. Or to put it another way, without any external hindrances to the pursuit of perfect love, ordinary couples find themselves under pressure to be dissatisfied with their 'inferior' unions.

Here lies one of the reasons why the divorce figures are rocketing. 'People are getting divorced in such numbers . . . because their expectations of marriage are so high that they are unwilling to put up with a poor substitute' (Berger and Berger, quoted in Jaeggi and Holstein 1985: 36).

> Since after six weeks her third husband no longer leaps to his feet, but becomes flabby and domestic, has had enough of the physiological side of things and is beginning to think about social life, about his job and the fact that he had better invite the de Vries family for the evening, keeps talking about being promoted and having arthritis, she suddenly realizes, flush with moral righteousness and dignity, that she has deceived herself. This feeling of having deceived oneself never fails to appear. So then she decides to speak to him, quite magnanimously, and in order to make her announcement more impressive she puts on a turban. 'Dear third Mr Spider,' says the spider, and folds her hairy little paws, 'let us treat each other in a dignified manner and separate without any sordid muck-raking. Let us not sully the memory of our past happiness with pointless foul language. I owe you the truth, and the truth, my dear, is that I no longer love you . . . I have deceived myself. I believed with all my soul that you would be Mr Spider forever. I'm sorry, but you should know: there's a fourth Mr Spider in my life and he means everything to me.' (Cohen 1983: 330–1)

This search for new horizons is fuelled from within; the more scope one has the more one feels driven to seek alternatives (Nunner-Winkler 1989). In this context it means the new options – separating and divorcing – have an impact even if they play a minor role in the statistics. The mere fact that they are on people's minds (and the mass media do their best to foster this interest) affects the old ways of living together. Anyone upholding the idea of marriage does so knowing there are real alternatives, and may find themselves compelled to justify what amounts to a conscious choice.

The humorist Chlodwig Ploth describes the situation like this:

> Two friends meet in a pub.
>
> A: Wow, it's nice to be back here again. How are you people getting on. What are the Krögers up to?
>
> B: They split up a long time ago. He's living with another woman in Sachsenhausen and I have no idea where she is.
>
> A: Oh, and what about the Zierfelds?
>
> B: They just had a fight. He left and is living in a commune. She's living in Bornheim with Volker – he's a teacher. Don't know if you know him. And how are things with you?
>
> A: Well, you know, it just didn't work out any more. Susi's living somewhere else with a really nice sort, and I'm back in the old flat with Karin – she's a psychologist. And you two? How's that going?
>
> B: Well, we're still together, but you know we've often thought about it, really. But then there's our son, and besides that, you know, and every so often, I don't know if you understand, but sometimes we get on quite well together. It's weird, but, you know, that is how it is. Do you understand?
>
> A: Hey, there's no need to be ashamed, old fruit. I understand, don't worry about it.
>
> (Quoted in Nunner-Winkler 1989)

The very fact that one has to justify living in an old-fashioned way causes the spiral of change to spin even faster. Sticking to familiar habits is easy enough as long as there are no extreme problems to cope with; optional behaviour, on the other hand, has to be justified using positive arguments. A marriage which is predetermined is accepted as long as it is not intolerable, but a freely chosen one has to be defended as the 'best' solution against all the possibilities. So justifying one's step pushes up one's standards on what constitutes happiness.

Work as the great divider

So far we have seen that present-day couples are bound together by their mutual hope of being loved – which causes problems. These private problems, however, inherent in the idea of a perfect love, are exacerbated by yet another factor. The companionship we seek from one another is not to be found in a social vacuum but in surroundings where impersonal forces are at work which often undermine our efforts. This crucial factor is the way employment is currently organized. Instead of binding the couple together as a team in pre-industrial society, the working conditions we know tend to cut men and women off from one another, to segregate them into different worlds.

There are of course still so-called traditional marriages founded on the old pattern of bread-winner/home-maker, sending one out into the stresses of the job market and leaving the other isolated at home with a monotonous routine. It is hard to find a common language for these two worlds, and where words fail there is only silence and alienation:

> She doesn't notice when you are out of breath; she doesn't suspect that your arm is getting sore; of course she knows that you work hard; of course she knows that he supports the household, fits in with all requests, takes care of all the expenses; of course she knows about his troubles and his bad mood; she has her own troubles and bad moods; she also locks her worries away from him. But one day you stand there and ask yourself, how can it go on? No more verve, no more alarms, no more following or accompanying each other, no more shared discussions on the future, nothing but being taken for granted and a peaceful division of labour . . . That is what the peaceful happiness of a sixteen-year marriage turns into, and life becomes like a pot of curdled milk, sour and thick, in which you drown like a fly, quite soberly. (Wassermann 1987: 93)

Or there is the other kind of marriage favoured especially by young people where both partners work away from home and have to manage their lives accordingly. Most professional positions nowadays are designed on the tacit assumption that they will be filled by

> one person backed by half another person and organized in terms of quantity and quality in ways which completely ignore private commitments; auxiliary work and services are provided by the half person, usually the wife. Women's day-to-day chores are meant to provide the husband and family with food, clothing and a comfortable home and to care for the next generation, freeing the man from everyday worries and stresses so that he can take on his taxing professional role unhindered. (Beck-Gernsheim 1980: 68–9)

Given such premises, what happens when more and more women have careers of their own? It is a matter of simple arithmetic; both spouses now lack the third person to take over the work backstage and dispense affection. This is why in thousands of homes after the exertions of the day there are short-tempered people disagreeing on who cleans the bathroom and who fetches the kids, a widespread feud on the private division of labour which has been thoroughly researched.

In fact this is only part of the problem, for in everyday life just as much as in our theorizing about it we tend to forget that it isn't just housework in the strict sense but emotional work that is needed. The human being, and certainly the working human being, does not live by bread alone; emotional support is also essential. The dictates of the market – speed and efficiency, competition and career – infiltrate into our homes and surface as irritability and tension. (It is not coincidental that the gender roles polarizing working husbands and women in charge of domestic bliss were first found in the nineteenth century.) Life at home becomes difficult if both partners are waiting in vain for emotional

support and understanding from one another. This is not pure egotism or individual weakness, but a collective event, the same drama in innumerable kitchens brought about by the person-and-a-half jobs which wear everybody out.

My business, your business: a preference for contracts

Feeling increasingly helpless and cornered, people look for advice, and the market responds with a boom in patent recipes on how to run one's life. The flood of books is almost impossible to keep track of, as broad in range as it is diverse, offering a kind of supermarket of philosophies for living and loving. From our viewpoint it is interesting to ask: what rules do they suggest for making our shared lives easier?

One soon realizes that the question is wrongly put, at least in part. Certainly there are plenty of books on offer which purport to tear down the barriers of disappointment, silence and resignation, but there are just as many self-help books which push the topic of companionship – getting on together – right to the margin, if they mention it at all. The main subject is quite different and found in all kinds of variations, sometimes formulated gently and sometimes very crassly: it is protecting 'me' against 'us'. People are recommended to 'regulate as many aspects of everyday living together as possible in a marriage contract' (Partner 1984: 85ff.).

The prime purpose here is not to organize life in ways which promote togetherness or closeness in a permanent dialogue but to protect one's own interests by means of regulations. More and more couples are taking this advice. In Germany (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 June 1985) and the USA (*International Herald Tribune*, 24 September 1986) there is a sharp rise in the number of people entering into such agreements:

> The man's fiancée was slim. He liked her that way. He wanted her to stay that way. And he was determined to do everything in his power to ensure her continued slenderness . . . Before the wedding, the groom got his bride to agree to a contract to pay a fine if she gained weight, refundable upon weight loss. That was no idle promise. The couple backed it up in writing in a prenuptial agreement negotiated by a New York attorney.
>
> Welcome to marriage, contractual style, circa 1986, a time when legal documents increasingly are spelling out everything from closet-space allocations after the wedding to who gets to keep the rent-controlled apartment after the divorce. It is not uncommon to find premarital contracts decreeing that spouses will alternate in choosing vacation spots, that the parties will share equally in disciplining children or that the partners have fully disclosed to one another the nature of their prior sexual experiences

> . . . Lawyers say they are seeing a rising demand for all sorts of prenuptial agreements, from the strictly financial to those with unusual lifestyle clauses. (*International Herald Tribune*, 24 September 1986)

And what happens if differences nevertheless arise as time goes by? Even then you can make a contract. Where there is nothing more in common the new philosophy of self-help offers civilized ways of coping with the situation, rediscovering the old principle '*do ut des*', plainly translated as 'what I don't like about you and you don't like about me will be got rid of by exchange.' There are already self-help books recommending 'agreements for mutual behaviour alteration'. A few instructions from one of them read as follows:

> Each partner gets something he/she wants from the other. For instance, you contract to 'wear a nice robe in the morning instead of that torn one'. He agrees to 'come home for dinner on time instead of going drinking with the boys'. You start out with simple behaviours and progress to more complex: ('She should initiate more sex . . .', 'He should kiss me more . . .'). (Baer 1976)

Freed from all outer constraints and able to marry whom you like, it paradoxically turns out that you may need new kinds of mutual control. Where everything is open, everything has to be negotiated, and without a common cause each individual's personal interests have to be protected from incursions by the other. The kind of self-help books mentioned above reflect and even amplify this trend. The question of what will become of the couple's togetherness is again incorrectly put, for that is not what is at stake here, or at least not primarily so.

From the evidence collected so far the following picture emerges. In modern marriage what links the two partners is their feelings for one another; the common ground is almost exclusively emotional and if the good feelings seem to be evaporating, then that is the beginning of the end of the marriage. It is the idea of 'romantic love' which gives marriage this strong emotional bias and has helped to transform our expectations; what used to be 'a lifelong bond has turned into a commitment which is upheld only under certain conditions' (Furstenberg 1987: 30).

The strain of persevering

> The ordeals in the mountains lie behind us,
> Ahead lie the ordeals in the plains.
> (Bertolt Brecht)

The main attraction people see in one another nowadays is not a common aim in life but the prospect of happiness, of finding the 'right' partner, a mixture of dream lover and best friend. But as dreams alter and friends prove less exciting than one thought, happiness turns out to be fugitive. More formally, *the space occupied by each individual in modern society makes close relationships precarious*:

> The family as an open space . . . means that it is in principle open to *any* definition, provided it remains a 'private' one not immediately connected with earning a living. But that also means that it is open to *no* definition, at least no permanent one. (Ostner and Pieper 1980: 123; emphasis in the original)

In the recent past hopes were pinned on self-determination and shaking off traditional obligations. The promise was clear: once all obstacles have been overcome, in whatever form – from family resistance to class considerations to lack of money – then true love will win. And it was also absolutely certain that this love would last forever. As Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* concludes:

> I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth . . . I know no weariness of my Edward's society; he knows none of mine . . . We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking . . . we are precisely suited in character – perfect concord is the result. (Brontë 1966: 475–6)

The modern discovery is that when love changes and what used to be a community of two helpmates has become a community of two lovers, the emotions themselves become hard work. Love under modern conditions is not an event which takes place once but is a state to be fought for anew every day, not just in good and bad times but all the time against the insecurities and upsets modern society forces on it.

To do this one needs patience and tolerance; such a relationship involves tenacious negotiations, often accompanied by skirmishing and a series of mini summit conferences, with no end in sight and the aggravating difficulty that the participants after years of practice are experts in each other's weaknesses and no-go areas. Love, having cast off its old shackles, finds itself under attack from a new quarter:

> Whether walking, sitting or lying down,
> they are together.

They have said their piece. They have kept silence.
That's it . . .

They speak in silence. And keep silent with words.
Their mouths run empty,
Their silence is of nineteen sorts
(if not more).

The sight of their souls and ties
Makes them angry.
They're like gramophones with three records.
They make you uneasy.

(Erich Kästner, *Gewisse Ehepaare*
(Certain married couples))

Love as a cuddly idyll? If only it were. The freedoms modern times offer are 'risky opportunities' (Keupp 1988). The more intense our feelings are, the more likely we are to suffer from them, from the mistakes, misunderstandings and complications they bring about. (If you can climb a peak you can equally fall into a crevasse, and being heartbroken is more than just a cliché phrase from the hit parade.) The distress men and women suffer in trying to live with one another is not purely their own fault, a byproduct of too much egocentricity. It also has something to do with modern definitions of love and marriage. Our feelings are supposed to be the basis, but feelings as we well know can be fickle: 'The heart is an extremely flexible muscle' (Woody Allen's film *Hannah and her Sisters*, final scene). While the classic literary theme used to be 'they can't get together,' in modern literature it is 'they can't live together.' Or as Dieter Wellershoff writes, 'In the old days lovers ran up against institutional barriers, while nowadays they are wading through a swamp of ideology called happiness' (quoted in Hage 1987).

From this one might conclude that any gain in terms of freedom and independence is quietly leaking away again. 'It rather looks as though the exigencies of the past are being replaced by the exigencies of the present' (Mayer 1985: 87). Nevertheless, if our modern ways of living harbour disappointment and conflict, earlier generations with their rigorous restrictions on personal freedom were hardly better off. There is certainly nothing to be gained from returning to the old ways; what we must find are new ways of living with one another which are both free *and* lasting.

One important step in this direction could be recognizing the 'double-faced' nature of liberation processes, the continuous dialectic between advantages and drawbacks. Perhaps that would make it easier to look for happiness on the other side too, amid the strain of persevering, of

fighting for what we have. As it goes in a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*, 'The love of your life? I believe that is when two people manage to put up with each other for their whole life' (Capek 1985). In the chilly world of independence love is defined as a burden and yet missed as a permanent support. As the epochs and their problems change, love remains a utopia, a design for a better world:

> Those marriages which start off with love are a bad sign. I wonder whether those great lovers in the stories one reads would continue to love their mate if she were ill, bed-ridden, and he, the man, had to take care of her the way one takes care of a baby; you understand all the unpleasantness I'm talking about here. Well, I believe he would not love her any more. True love, let me tell you, is growing old together. (Cohen 1984: 18)