

**Federica Gregoratto.** *Love Troubles: A Philosophy of Eros*. Columbia University Press 2025. 280 pp. \$140.00 USD (Hardcover 9780231217620); \$35.00 USD (Paperback 9780231217637).

Gregoratto examines erotic love from the perspective of critical social philosophy, which views love “in relation to the social, political, economic cultural conditions that shape our existences, and our lives in common” (2). I will have more to say about this methodology below; but it seems obvious that anyone who analyzes erotic or romantic love only from this perspective is bound to find it ‘troublesome’ since our social world is *troublesome*, at best. But even in this unhappy social setting, love nevertheless flourishes. Dating apps are popular, rom-com movies sell out, and marriage rates have surged post-COVID. Personally, I have been happily married for 30 years, and many of my friends are happily married or partnered (some with children) for many years. Many others are not monogamous but seem to have interesting, gratifying love lives. Gregoratto mentions various media sources in support of the idea that love is ‘troubled’, and that people (especially men) are ‘lonely’, but hardly any solid data is provided to support these widespread media memes. Nonetheless, Marx’s pronouncements, from ~150 years ago, are invoked early (4-5), but they only muddy the waters, as far as this reader can tell. Gregoratto also emphasizes their concern is with “erotic love” but says almost (when the time for conceptual clarification is rife) about what this means - which is a great deal, historically.

Chapter One contrasts two recent definitions or analyses of human love, Jenkins and Kottman, but then suddenly turns to a long explication of Plato’s *Symposium*, frequently gesturing to the Chapter’s title ‘Some Kinda Love’ - a pointless insider reference to a VU song. Gregoratto then parades several wearisome readings and critiques of the famous Speech of Aristophanes (while mostly ignoring the several other encomia in the *Symposium*), and finally announcing their view that Aristophanes’ ‘union theory’ relies upon “the shabby distinctions drawn between romantic love and friendship” (30). Gregoratto’s point is that other forms of love (e.g. the *philia* of Aristotle) do not demand the ‘melding’ or union Plato’s Aristophanes envisions. I don’t recall Plato emphasizing this distinction: the *Symposium* consists entirely of speeches in honor of the god *Eros*. But why should each of the several speeches in the dialogue have to inventory all the possible or imaginary aspects of love? And what *is* the sort of love that Aristophanes (Plato) *is* evoking in his famous myth? The ‘union’ model is obviously simplistic, yet highly romantic, and relatable, befitting a poet, as Plato represents the real Aristophanes. The existential pain of the ‘halves’ is



palpable in Plato's work: why isn't this enough to ask of a celebrated poet? Chapter One is rounded out by very incisive discussions of Frankfurt, Pettit, Badhwar, Velleman, Freidman, Badiou, etc., but what these very recent, complicated discussions imply for the relatively austere views of Plato and/or Aristotle is not made clear.

Chapter Two, 'He has Kissed her with his Freedom' (Joni Mitchell), gives particular attention to feminist writers: de Beauvoir; the Italian writer Elena Ferrante; and a host of Hegelians. Gregoratto's treatment of De Beauvoir's 'ambivalent' attitude to love is clear but not groundbreaking. The detailed discussion of the abstract Hegelian notion of 'Anerkennung' or 'special recognition' seems to take us far from erotic love (and its troubles). The miscellaneous Hegelian tropes foregrounded by Gregoratto, e.g.—"the first moment in love is that I do not wish to be a self-subsistent and independent person" (61)—are tacitly endorsed; but they seem in line with Aristophanes' 'union' conception of love that was just severely criticized in Chapter One. Thankfully, the chapter eventually turns to an even richer discussion of De Beauvoir, which is connected in illuminating ways to relatively obscure discussions by Margaret Gilbert, Ferrante, and S. Cavell. The book definitely hits its stride by the end of Chapter Two.

The next, un-numbered, *Excursus*, 'Why Erotic Love?', settles on the book's titular concern. Gregoratto argues, powerfully, what most people who have loved already know: love is a powerful individual affect which is nevertheless somewhat under the control of those in love. This is followed by a very useful overview of important criticisms of Romantic love, including the observation that it can instill confusion, especially in young lovers. Their natural inclination may be non-binary. Gregoratto then disrupts this natural conception of Romantic love, contrasting it with e.g. Indigenous conceptions, and others, which seem more open to polyamory and nonmonogamy (99). This excellent chapter has a clear arc and introduces valuable, new perspectives.

After the optimistic, emancipatory message of Chapter 2, and the *Excursus*, Chapter 3, 'The Mess We Are In' (P J Harvey), "explores Eros's dark sides" (106) specifically: complicit love, masterly love, and exploitative love. Against the strongly autonomous notions of love in Kant and Frankfurt, the author invokes Niklas Luhmann, who asserts that "both lovers attempt to enter the other's subjectivity" (111). It is hard to see how this explication illuminates anything. Luhmann claims that somehow modern institutions have "had the effect of *normalizing* the subversive, rebellious character of passion" (112). I don't know what this means, nor how to decide whether

it's true or false. The next author discussed (Giddens), introduces "confluent love" (113); but this watery metaphor does not help us at all to perceive the real promises and problems of love. In the middle of the chapter, we learn that Marx was "against love" (115)—who knew? But we learn nothing about love, from Karl via Gregoratto, except the predictable (and obviously incorrect) dogma that love follows money. We get nowhere, in this long chapter, if we're interested in understanding love. It's a real let-down to slide from the undogmatic, insightful, discussions of Chapter 2 and *Excursus*, to the dogmatic, dubious musings of outmoded critical theorists. Author next explains, on their own, more or less, the perils of complicit, masterly, and exploitative, love; and this part of the chapter is valuable. In contrast, Gregoratto's brief "explication of the critical-theoretical vocabulary employed in these pages" (143) felt like a tangential, dumbing down exercise: predictable, and far less interesting than the topic at hand.

In Chapter 4, 'Avalanche: Erotic Emotions and Affects' (Leonard Cohen), Gregoratto considers the crucial role of affects or the emotions in erotic love. Emotions needn't overwhelm us: Nussbaum, for example, prefers a 'cognitivist' view that our sense of happiness or well-being can be rationally evaluated like other things we believe. But there are strong worries about erotic 'cognitivism', which Gregoratto sets out very well. I am inclined, with her, to resist cognitivism about erotic love; but then it remains to understand how we think of the manifestly powerful effect of love. Before getting to Hegel, Marx, and Marcuse—Gregoratto does go there—the simplest thing to postulate is that sexual love is a crude, natural emotion, like fear or hate. I can't think of an objection to love as this sort of affect. Similarly, in this chapter, Gregoratto considers a sort of shared or *collective affectivity*, which apparently is the sharing of affective love or affection towards something across 2 or more persons. This seems possible, but Gregoratto abandons this idea they had just raised (relying on Durkheim, who apparently doesn't help much).

In the Fifth, and final, chapter, Gregoratto articulates their idea of 'Joy, as an Act of Resistance' (band: Idle). In her words, this is the idea that "what happens between lovers is extravagant; it may exceed the erotic *we* and spread into other domains of social life" (178). This is a familiar Hollywood trope (e.g. Bonnie and Clyde) and Gregoratto mentions several other films. An obvious question is: what makes "erotic resistance" different from solitary resistance or (more commonly) non-erotic collective agency, as we typically find in warfare and revolution? Gregoratto rightly observes that strong friendship is common and effective among warriors (as Plato observed) and she indicates how "love in the trenches" might work in modern warfare too. Within their long,

interesting discussion of various films, it is surprising Author does not mention Plato's discussion of 'erotic armies' in the *Symposium* and *Republic*. Marx and Engels are supposed to be a "power couple" who "follow a classic romantic script" (184-5). But were they erotic? If not, then were they then just a corporate entity, or simply political or academic allies? Late in this final chapter, Author asks (idyllically for us in USA) what 'erotic education' would involve. Author seems undecided, but they ought to have considered this answer: *nothing*. We don't erotically educate our cats and dogs, nor other animals in our yards and neighborhood. We can warn our children of predators, etc., but there is really no need to guide their sexual education, other than to just stay out of their way.

Despite the title of this book, there is little mention of the Greek, and more specifically Platonic, notion that love is not a human feeling, or a relation, but a god (*Eros*). If that is right, then love itself cannot die. So, if love has troubles, then maybe the social-critical theorists can fix *our* problem. But love itself is not the problem; maybe it's the solution. The clearly talented author of this text flashes brilliance, but too often gets bogged down by, at best, adjacent theory. In this reviewer's opinion, the problems of love (erotic or otherwise) do not require deep dives into Hegel, Marx, or Durkheim; only sober, careful reflection on human behavior and the facts of life. There are so many excellent volumes, papers, and stand-alone books, on love—and this volume may appeal to philosophers of a certain philosophical bent. But *Love Troubles* is unlikely to broadly and significantly re-orient philosophical attitudes to erotic love.

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