

Up Against Love

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When Laura Kipnis's *Against Love: A Polemic* came out, reviewers seemed to have trouble understanding what it was about. *Library Journal* claimed it skewered “our relationship foibles”, the *New York Observer* insisted it was an “incisive tract in praise of adultery”, and the usually-reliable [Salon](#) called it “a ‘defense’ of adultery” ([twice!](#)).

Against Love is a defense of adultery like *Capital* is a defense of playing hooky. No, Kipnis's aim is to dismantle the entire social institution of, well, love — the notion that the right, meaningful, and deeply human way to behave is to find one's perfect soulmate by the time school ends and then spend the rest of your life living, having sex, and sharing your feelings with them. Kipnis thinks the whole thing is crazy, a justification for locking people up in “domestic gulags”.

It's pretty safe these days to get up and say our school systems are crumbling, our borders are shot, our government is a mess, our voting system is broken, or even that our economic system needs an overhaul. But try criticizing our system of love and all you'll get back is stunned silence. Love is “the one subject where no disagreement will be entertained, about which one truth alone is permissible” (4). So criticisms, unspeakable in plain form, are disguised as the content of our comedy (take my wife please!) and the subtext of our films (*The Stepford Wives*, *Rosemary's Baby*).

Despite the fact that most long-term relationships fall apart, nobody suggests it's the idea of a long-term relationship that's the problem. Instead we're told that lasting relationships require “hard work”. So you go to work and put in some hard work and then come home and put in some more. Or maybe you

spend more time at the office to avoid having to come home. Or maybe you channel your unfulfilled passion into shopping. Either way, capitalism wins.

We love to brag that we've achieved genuine freedom in our romantic lives, laughing at those barbaric Muslims with their arranged marriages. But is our system that much different? Careful studies find that people have a suspiciously accurate habit of pairing up with people with a similar level of attractiveness and wealth (although sometimes an excess of one can compensate for a lack of the other). And then they promise to live with each other forever, to working to make it work. Sure, perhaps you get a little more latitude in picking your partner, but is this system really that different?

Most people don't see love as a system to be criticized, but they do feel the social straitjacket even if they assume it's just the "natural" way relationships work out. And they begin looking for an escape. Kipnis points to two: murder ("lethal intimate violence" — killing your lover — is so popular that there's an entire category in the crime statistics for it) and adultery (its popularity needs no statistics). Kipnis shies away from explicitly defending either (take that, *Salon!*), but she does suggest that adultery is a little bit of radical activism against the system, the critical practice of love.

She notes self-action generally comes before self-knowledge in these things; workers had walk-outs before they had unions. In the same way, the prevalence of adultery is people's individualized attempt at escaping from love, each one sneaking out for an affair, stealing time from work at work and work at home to embrace their feelings.

But it isn't just capitalism, with its pro-love infomercials and television specials, that tries to fit us to the system; the government gets into the act too. Politicians lecture us about family values, before sneaking out to cheat on their wives; states tie legal marriage to thousands of benefits, making submission to its notions of monogamy a prerequisite for perks. (Try to have several wives, like some folks in Utah, and you'll find yourself in jail — not to mention the laws against adultery still on the books in 45 states.) And just imagine what it was like before no-fault divorce, when you actually had to prove to the government that you deserved to be unmarried, "as if it were an injured lover refusing to let go once things were over" (172).

Kipnis doesn't propose any particular solution; she just wants to ask the question. The book is written in the style of the postmodern bombthrower, with far more meat than most books of such form, although sometimes the style's excesses get a little too heavy. The book's argument is studded with references to Freud and Marx and Marcuse, but done in such a flip and enjoyable way (and with thumbnail sketches of their love lives) that it feels like gossip, not scholarship.

But perhaps the best bits are the poetic descriptions of what it's like to be in love, from how you "find[] yourself so voluptuously hurtled into a state of possibility, a destabilizing, might-be-the-start-of-something kind of moment. [...]"

that first nervous phone call, coffee, or a drink, or—circumstances permitting—an incredible all-night marathon conversation” (7) to the “‘opening up’ required for relationship health [... which] will leave you feeling somewhat vulnerable, lying there psychically spread-eagled, exposed, and shivering on the examining table of your relationship” (76).

The book is a *tour de force* of writing, but even if it was dreadful, it’d still be worth it. What other book covers these topics, changes the way you look at love?

- [Buy the book](#)