

ONLINE DATING AND THE NAKEDNESS
OF HETEROSEXUALITY

Marie BERGSTRÖM, *Les Nouvelles lois de l'amour. Sexualité, couple, et rencontres au temps du numérique*
(Paris, Éditions de la Découverte, 2019, 228 p.)

Websites and smartphone applications allow large numbers of people to surpass the physical limits of in-person interaction and communicate in previously unimaginable ways. Because of its potential to significantly transform the scale of people's worlds and the size of their networks, observers have described this technology as responsible for phenomena as varied as sparking and sustaining major social movements, shaping transnational migration patterns, and dramatically amplifying fringe conspiracy theories. One sometimes wonders if there is anything social that the internet and its many tools do not transform in some way. Yet this seeming omnipotence of the internet, which in news media accounts is alternately celebrated and decried, has only recently gained sustained critical attention from sociologists. In her debut book, *The New Laws of Love* [*Les Nouvelles lois de l'amour*], Marie Bergström advances this important conversation by empirically investigating online dating, a behavior whose time for thorough analysis has been at hand for some time.

Studying how people use internet tools to find partners is challenging. The dual forces of illegitimacy within the discipline and intense public interest create obstacles. On the one hand, scholars doing work in this area are not as likely to be taken seriously by their peers, in part because sexualities research is often taxed as being limited to fads or chasing after ephemeral trends with few implications for the discipline. On the other hand, because online dating is talked about so much in popular discourse, its sociological dimensions are easily overlooked. To make matters worse, online dating websites and "apps" owe their success in large part to the opacity surrounding how they work. This allows users to believe in the myth of an endless sea of possibilities and the magic of chance encounters. The creators of these products are thus heavily invested in covering up the decidedly unsexy reality that social structures, including race, class, and gender, condition in major ways the kinds of people someone is likely to meet. Adding to all of this complexity, celebrities and others with large audiences amplify the idea that online dating is a major public issue.

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Indeed, even as many sociologists disregard people's internet-mediated sexual and romantic lives as insignificant, popular culture, journalistic accounts, and folk wisdom are overflowing with normative stories that either laud or lament the end of dating as we know it. For example, in a September 2020 episode of her podcast focusing on marriage, Michelle Obama, warned listeners that you "can't Tinder your way into a long-term relationship," referring to a dating app whose executives claim has millions of subscribers globally, generating significant annual revenues. The opinion that online dating is uniquely responsible for degrading the quality of contemporary relationships—framed as especially rampant among younger generations whose sexual socialization took place in a context where these tools were already mainstream—is grounded in well-trodden discourse. People who express this perspective are generally hostile toward the perceived marketization of romance and celebrate the notion of a pure love, untouched by the vagaries of social determinism. Ironically this is the same kind of love that online dating entrepreneurs often try to promote. Yet even as they claim that their products will allow their many users to meet the person of their dreams, surpassing the boundaries of their social positions, Bergström draws on a long tradition in the sociology of sexualities—which reveals relatively stable patterns of social homogamy among heterosexual romantic and sexual partners—to track the degree that online dating reproduces these logics of domination.

This book should end the skepticism of those who doubted the sociological relevance of online dating. It also flattens the now familiar lament regarding the supposedly deleterious effects of meeting people online or the distorting effects of limitless possibilities of partner choice on relationship satisfaction and longevity. One of Bergström's most powerful insights is just how banal online dating is and how it represents continuity—rather than a major rupture—in the way straight people find partners today. Drawing on a careful contextualization with ongoing demographic trends—primarily using French data from the *Institut d'Études Démographiques* where she conducted her research—Bergström links her observations with the evolutions in couple formation from the 20th to the 21st centuries. The author analyzes contemporary online dating among heterosexuals in France using a technique that is reminiscent of Wendy Griswold's methodological framework for cultural sociology.¹ Bergström studies the technology in its historical and cultural context, as well as its production, reception, and effects. Readers learn,

¹ Wendy GRISWOLD, 1987, "A Methodological Framework for the Sociology of Culture,"

Sociological Methodology, 17: 1-35.

for example, about the motivations and perspectives of French website and app designers since the advent of digital communication as well as the impacts of corporatization, consolidation, and market segmentation on people's intimate behavior. Importantly, the majority of these programmers are men. As such, they create programs that reflect their own—often sexist and stereotypical—assumptions about what heterosexual users want. Male domination is quite literally built into the software.²

The 19th century witnessed a shift away from marriages unselfconsciously motivated by families seeking to improve their material and social circumstances. At the same time, new cultural meanings about romantic marriage emerged and a new type of love entrepreneur seized an emerging market to help people enact those meanings. Matchmaking services, matrimonial agencies, and personal ads helped anxious young (and sometimes less young) people navigate through expanding choices of potential mates. They also served as an alternative to institutions such as religious organizations and community groups. Inspired by Viviana Zelizer's work that demystifies the economics of intimacy, Bergström explains how the 21st century's online dating services have inherited the basics of these older technologies—think for example of printed catalogues of matchmaking services or the carefully crafted wording in a local newspaper's classified section—and added new dimensions to them.

Through this book, Bergström adds to the burgeoning sociological conversation about the contemporary dimensions of heterosexuality in Europe and North America. In general, that work reveals that even as periods of sexual exploration in youth, such as “hooking up” or norm questioning, become increasingly institutionalized and entry into marriage delayed to older ages the expectation that people should strive for long-term heterosexual coupledness has not waned.³ Moreover, Bergström, like those doing work in the same vein, shows how today's heterosexual dating practices favor some people—generally white, middle-class men—over others. When it comes to how straight men and women take up these tools in their intimate lives, Bergström provides rich accounts from interviews with a sample of online daters that complement the survey data.

² For more on this see: Brandee EASTER, 2018, “Feminist_brevity_in_light_of_masculine_long-windedness: Code, Space, and Online Misogyny,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, 4 (July 4, 2018): 675–85 [<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447335>].

³ See for example: Emma MISHEL *et al.*, 2020, “Cohort Increases in Sex with Same-

Sex Partners: Do Trends Vary by Gender, Race, and Class?,” *Gender & Society*, 34, 2 (April 1, 2020): 178–209 [<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243219897062>]; Lisa WADE, 2017, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company); Jane WARD, 2020, *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* (New York, NYU Press).

Readers discover that sexism and classism work in sometimes surprising ways. Age and life experience are key determinants in how people relate to online dating. In their teens, most young people use dating apps in generally playful ways with groups of friends, giving them a window into and preparation for sexual and romantic lives they will increasingly experiment with as they get older. In their 20s, men and women of the same ages appear to be in starkly different positions. Young men have a harder time finding partners because women in their peer group see them as unserious, unreliable, and immature. In contrast, women in their 20s turn their attention to men who are somewhat older and already have established livelihoods. This relative advantage for women diminishes quickly as both groups age. Indeed, Bergström describes how men endure a short-lived waiting period until their late 20s when suddenly online dating mostly shifts to their advantage and stays that way permanently. For women, as they age, the likelihood that they will find a man who suits their preferences decreases over time. This is due, in part, to heterosexual men's preferences for younger, never married women without children. Through all of this, most online daters say they are looking for a partner with whom there is a good "feeling." Of all the aspects of this book, Bergström's systematic unpacking of "*le feeling*" is perhaps the most satisfying. Several of the sections of the book detail the social nuances of finding the "right" mate. When her interviewees say they simply want to find someone who sparks good vibrations, they usually mean a person whose online profile has no spelling mistakes, whose job and family background match their expectations, and whose ability to communicate is smooth and respects the habitus of the people in the social class they are seeking.

By drawing a through line from earlier technological and cultural changes to the 20th century and into the digitally connected world of today, Bergström finds evidence for her core argument: online dating is both a continuation of older social practices and a genuinely new phenomenon. Websites and apps for meeting intimate partners are novel because they represent the first major "splitting apart of the places where one recruits partners on the one hand, and the contexts of ordinary sociability (school, work, parties, and hobbies) on the other" (207-208, my translation). For Bergström, these new digital spaces devoted entirely and exclusively to finding partners represent two kinds of privatization. One is economic. The market expands to create and shape this new space. The other is social. People can now "privately" connect with partners who are unknown to anyone else in their social circles, thus escaping outside scrutiny—think of nosy parents, co-workers, or onlookers at the

gym—in their sexual and romantic explorations. These privatizations are not entirely unprecedented, as the author recognizes. Indeed, people with stigmatized sexualities, such as gay men and lesbians, have long created spaces to meet others with shared interests in ways and places that shield them from violence, rejection, and other types of opprobrium. For heterosexuals, however, these privatizations of intimacy—especially on such a large scale—are not only new but also suspect. Critics of capitalism and defenders of “classic” courtship alike find something to lament about in online dating. What creates these visceral reactions? Bergström argues that online dating crystalizes and exaggerates already existing trends. But by doing so in such a tangible and unambiguous manner, it fully exposes the social dynamics that structure how different-sex partnerships form today. In other words, “on the internet, heterosexuality is naked” [207, my translation]. We can thank the author for making no effort to cover it back up.

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