

The Commercial Spirit of Intimate Life and the Abduction of Feminism: Signs from Women's Advice Books

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Praising and encouraging are very close to pushing, and when you do that you are trying again to take control of his life. Think about why you are lauding something he's done. Is it to help raise his self-esteem? That's manipulation. Is it so he will continue whatever behavior you're praising? That's manipulation. Is it so that he'll know how proud you are of him? That can be burden for him to carry. Let him develop his own pride from his own accomplishments.¹

Bestselling advice books for women published in the United States over the last two decades may offer a glimpse into an important wider trend in popular culture. This trend is a curious, latter-day parallel to the very different cultural shift Max Weber describes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*² (1958). The current cultural shift differs in the object of its ideas (love and not work), in the social sphere it most affects (the family and not the economy) and in the population most immediately influenced (women, not men). The cultural shift reflected in advice books concerns a more marginal ideology, feminism, and the commercial transmutation of it is a shift that is smaller, I hope, in scale. Like the earlier trend, this one represents the outcome of an ongoing cultural struggle, gives rise to countertrends, and is uneven in its effect. But the parallel is there.

Just as Protestantism, according to Max Weber, "escaped from the cage" of the Church to be transposed into an inspirational "spirit of capitalism" that drove men to make money and build capitalism, so feminism may be "escaping from the cage" of a social movement to buttress a commercial spirit of intimate life that was originally separate from and indeed alien to it.³ Just as market conditions ripened the soil for capitalism, so a weakened family prepares the soil for a commercialized spirit of domestic life.⁴ Magnified moments in advice books tell this story.

In exploring evidence of this shift, this parallel, I'm assuming that bestselling advice books for women published between 1970 and 1990 are a likely bell-wether of trends in the popular ideas governing women's approach to intimate life. I also assume that advice books, like other commercial and professional conveyors of guidance, are becoming more important while traditional spheres of authority, families and to a degree churches, are becoming less so.⁵ Thus, while

the counsel of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, ministers, priests and rabbis holds relatively less weight than it would have a century ago, that of professional therapists, television talk show hosts, radio commentators, video producers, magazine and advice book authors assumes relatively more weight.⁶ While people turn increasingly to anonymous authorities, the emotional problems they wish to resolve are probably more perplexing than ever.⁷

Like other commercially-based advice-givers, the authors of advice books act as emotional investment counselors.⁸ They do readings of broad social conditions and recommend to readers of various types, how, how much, and in whom to “invest” emotional attention. They recommend emotional practices – such as asking the reader to think of “praise” as “manipulation” – to cast doubt on the sincerity of one’s own praise and to detach oneself from another person, as the advice book writer, Robin Norwood recommends in the opening quote. Writers also motivate their readers by hitching investment strategies to inspirational ideas and images. These ideas and images are buried in the “magnified moments” inside the parable-like stories that make up much of these books.

Neither author nor reader, I imagine, is much aware that they are offering or receiving “emotional investment counseling”. Rather, authors see themselves as giving, and readers see themselves as receiving, helpful advice. Sometimes it is. My basic point is that helping and being helped is a matter of such overwhelming importance that any cultural shift which “thins out” the process through which we give care to one another, or empties the content of help should make us stop, look and listen.⁹

A Cultural Cooling: Trends and Counter Trends

With these starting points, I propose that many bestselling advice books published between 1970 and 1990 have become “cooler” in their approach to intimate life. They reflect a “cultural cooling”. This does not mean that individuals need one another less, only that they are invited to *manage their needs more*. The trend also reflects a paradox. Earlier advice books are far more patriarchal, less based on open and equal communication, but oddly, they often reflect more “warmth”. More recent advice books call for more open and more equal communication, but they propose “cooler” emotional strategies with which to engage those equal bonds. From the vantage point of the early feminist movement, modern advice books reaffirm one ideal (equality) but undermine another (the

development of emotionally rich social bonds) I've come to this conclusion by explaining the bestselling advice books for women published between 1970 and 1990 and found in the bibliography.¹⁰

Two literatures bear on this "cooling". One supports the observation of cooling but doesn't link it to advice books. The other analyzes advice books but doesn't focus on cooling. Christopher Lasch, Ann Swidler and Francesca Cancian, among others, argue that "commitment" plays a diminishing part in people's idea of love.¹¹ Data from American national opinion polls document a decline over the last two decades in commitment to long-term love. In their study of daytime soap opera heroes and heroines, Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby don't observe a shift away from the idea of lasting love, but they note a shift away from social practices which affirm it.¹²

Analyses of the advice literature, on the other hand, says little about this cooling. Commentators have critiqued the authoritarianism, privatism and ideology of victimhood implicit in many advice books. In *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*, Wendy Kaminer critiques advice books in the Recovery Movement (based on the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous) for appealing to individual choice while taking it away. They give orders. In *Self Help Culture: Reading Women's Readings* Wendy Simonds rightly argues a second point, namely that self-oriented quick-fix books deflect attention away from problems in the public sphere that cause people to need private help in the first place. In "Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine" Carol Tavris critiques the cult of victimhood many "survivor" books seem to promote.¹³

While there is much truth in all three critiques, I believe that something else is also going on – a shift in the cultural premises about human attachment. While there is much talk about the relative merit of this or that kind of family, these advice books take us down a weird cultural tunnel that shows the soil and root system that characterizes them all.

To get a good look at this soil, we can draw an imaginary line through the emotional core of each advice book, by focusing on the best and worst "magnified moments" in it, the "top" and "bottom" of the personal experience the book portrays. This method works best with the therapeutic, interview and autobiographical books.

Most books seem to have four parts. In one, the author establishes a tone of voice, a relationship to the reader, and connects the reader to a source of authority – the Bible, psychoanalysis, corporate expertise, Hollywood or the school of hard knocks. In a second part, the author didactically describes moral or social reality. "This is how men are" or "that's what the job market's

like”, they say, or “this is the rule” and how it bends under a variety of circumstances. In a third part, the book describes concrete practices; for example, “With your boyfriend, listen, with your girlfriend, you can talk” or “Wear blue to a "power breakfast meeting" at work”. In a fourth – and I believe most revealing – part of the advice book, the author tells stories. These stories are based on the lives of patients in an author's psychotherapeutic practice, interviewees or the author's own life. Such stories tend to be either exemplary or cautionary. Exemplary stories tell one what to do and cautionary stories tell one what not to do.

Stories contain magnified moments, episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out; it is metaphorically rich, unusually elaborate and often echoes throughout the book.

One thing a magnified moment magnifies is the *feeling* a person holds up as ideal. It shows what a person, up until the experience began, *wanted* to feel. Thus, there is an ideal expressed in the moment and there is culture within the ideal. Magnified moments reflect a feeling ideal both when a person joyously lives up to it or, in some spectacular way, does not. More than the descriptions of the author's authority or beliefs, more than the long didactic passages in advice books about what is or isn't true or right, magnified moments show the experience we wish. We can ask many questions about this experience. We may ask, for example, what is it precisely about a feeling that makes it seem wonderful or terrible? Against what ideal is it being compared? Who is on the scene during the moment? What relations are revealed, in reality or imagination? By interrogating the moment, so to speak, we ferret out the cultural premises which underlie it. About the advice to which these magnified moments lend support we can ask further questions. About the experience, and the ideal against which it is measured we may ask many questions. Does the advice support a general paradigm of trust or of caution? Does it center on expressing one's emotional needs, or marshaling strategic control over them? Is the book “warm” in the sense of legitimizing a high degree of care and social support, and offering scope for human needs? Or is it “cool” in the sense of presuming the individual should get by with relatively little support, and by presuming she or he has fewer needs?

Doorway Drama

Let us contrast two “magnified moments”. The first is drawn from Marabel Morgan's (1973) *The Total Woman*, an arch-reactionary traditional-for-moderns which is curiously “warm”. The second is taken from Colette Dowling's (1981) *The Cinderella Complex*, a modern advice book which is curiously “cool”.¹⁴

From Marabel Morgan's *The Total Woman*:

If your husband comes home at 6:00, bathe at 5.00. In preparing for your six o'clock date, lie back and let go of the tensions of the day. Think about that special man who's on his way home to you...Rather than make your husband play hide-and-seek when he comes home tired, greet him at the door when he arrives. Make homecoming a happy time. Waltzing to the door in a cloud of powder and cologne is a great confidence builder. Not only can you respond to his advances, you will want to...For an experiment, I put on pink baby-doll pajamas and white boots after my bubble bath. I must admit that I looked foolish and felt even more so. When I opened the door that night to greet Charlie, I was unprepared for his reaction. My quiet, reserved, non-excitabile husband took one look, dropped his brief case on the doorstep, and chased me around the diningroom table. We were in stitches by the time he caught me, and breathless with that old feeling of romance...Our little girls stood flat against the wall watching our escapade, giggling with delight. We all had a marvelous evening together, and Charlie forgot to mention the problems of the day.¹⁵

What did Marabel Morgan feel? First she felt delight and surprise at Charlie's response. Charlie was surprised, of course, but then so was Marabel – at the very fact that her act succeeded.

In some ways, Morgan's peak moment is the same as other peak moments in advice books to women. She feels central, appreciated, in the middle of an experience she wants to have. But in other ways her moment is different. For one thing, her moment is “fun”, and fun in a certain kind of way. It is sexually exciting within the context of the family. It is marital and family fun. She is breathless in her husband's arms – not in a lover's arms. And her two girls are nearby, “flat against the wall” and “giggling”. Sexual excitement is marital and marital fun includes the kids.

In addition to Morgan's husband and daughters, present in fantasy are a community of women who are also working on their marriages. After trying out a certain move at home, Morgan tells us, one “Total Woman” class member often calls another the next morning to see how it went. Spanning across families, a mirror opposite to the women's movement, a community of Christian wives are “watching the show” in each others' homes.

Marabel Morgan's big moment doesn't occur naturally, as when one is suddenly overcome by a magnificent rainbow or sunset. It is not “spontaneous”. Her moment is a well planned, choreographed act. In addition to dressing in pink pajamas, she dresses as a pixie, a pirate, or comes to the door totally nude wrapped in cellophane. Her magnified moment is not an occasion for self-realization or revealing communication, not the “high” of sudden self-honesty or intimate communication. The act, the delighted response are a stylized, pre-modern form of communication in themselves. Marabel puts on her babydoll suit. Charlie sees she means to please him. He is pleased. She receives his pleasure. They have communicated. *That* is the high point. At the same time, Morgan's act paradoxically doubles as a shield against intimate communication. With doorway surprises, she advises her readers to “keep him off guard.”¹⁶ Whether she is pleasing Charlie or getting her way with him by working female wiles, whether she draws inspiration from the Bible or Hollywood, Marabel Morgan is approaching her husband in an old-fashioned way.

At bottom, the pink pajamas, and the “Total Woman” homework and tests are a Christian fundamentalist “solution” to disintegrating marriages – a trend quickly mounting through the 1960s and 1970s when Morgan wrote. Throughout the book, there is a drum-beat reminder of divorce. Speaking of a woman who could not adapt to her husband's desire to travel, Morgan cautions,

Betty is now divorced . . . Carl has since found someone else to enjoy his exciting new way of life with him. In your marriage it only makes sense for both of you to paddle in the same direction. Otherwise, you'll only go in circles – or like Carl, he may pull out and go downstream.¹⁷

In addition to friendly women in the same boat, then, are anonymous rivals who can replace the wife in a fading marriage. In spirit, these female rivals are present in the magnified moment of the *Total Woman* too.

I should add one other social relationship on the scene – that between author and reader. The girl-to-girl back fence tone of voice, the open, conversational style with which Morgan tells her story is itself a message. Morgan talks to the reader, not as a priest or professional expert, but as a girl-friend. She does not offer the indisputable received wisdom of the ages concerning “the correct way” to conduct oneself in a given situation. Her advice is personal. Culturally, she seems to be saying, “you and I are on our own. This is what I did. Why don't you try?” Curiously, other American traditional-for-moderns eschew a voice of authority in favor of the voice of a friend. How or whether you save your marriage is up to you, they seem to say, I wish you luck.

In contrast to her best moment, Morgan's worst moments virtually all focus on the discord that results when she challenges her husband's authority. Already criticized by her husband for being “uptight”, her following bad moment occurs:

I prepared a very nice dinner the next day and determined to be a sweet wife. However, the bottom fell out for me. Over the mashed potatoes, Charlie announced casually that we would be going out the next evening with some business associates. With no malice I blurted out, “Oh no, we can't.” And then I began to tell him of the plans I had already made. A terrible stony look passed over my husband's face. I braced myself. In icy tones, with obvious control, he asked, “Why do you challenge me on every decision I make?”¹⁸

Elsewhere, she talks about confronting her husband “eye ball to eye ball.”¹⁹ As this almost sexual image suggests, to Morgan patriarchy is what keeps a woman a woman; otherwise she'd be a man – and fight. Like many traditional women, Morgan presumes men and women are adversaries. Patriarchy, for her, is the deal that ends the war with the following outcome: the man gets the power, the woman gets the stable home. Morgan's big moment thus expresses a series of basic premises: (a) that men should lead, women should obey, (b) that women benefit from patriarchy, and (c) that it's a woman's job to keep marriage happy and it is mainly her fault if it's unhappy. These premises compose the cultural floorboard beneath magnified moments in *The Total Woman*.

The magnified moment reflects an anxiety and what Morgan imagines as a solution to it. The anxiety is that of women who fear “getting fired” from their marriages and becoming the displaced homemakers of tomorrow. Morgan proposes to beat the 1960s disintegration of the family,

compete with the pool of newly displaced women (the “other women” out there). And she does this on her own home turf. She incorporates the sexual revolution (including its ideal of sexual variety) into the monogamous, Christian marriage, and adds a little theater to a housewife's day.

While Morgan may seem to draw more from Hollywood than the Bible and feminine tradition, and she may seem more flamboyant than “warm”, her magnified moments place her as both “traditional” and “warm”. It is overwhelmingly clear that Morgan favors an authoritarian world in which men rule women, and men have greater human worth. In those respects, Morgan carries the antiquated, tattered flag for patriarchy.

At the same time, her simple-minded tips are all about moving forward and in, not backward and out of relationships. However antiquated the ethic affirmed in her magnified moment, it is communal. As an emotional investment counselor, she recommends that women invest their emotion work in the family and community.

The No-Needs Modern

At the other end of the spectrum, we find a moment from Colette Dowling's *The Cinderella Complex*:

Powerful emotional experiences await those who are really living out their own scripts. A Chicago woman in her early forties who still lives with and loves her husband is also intensely involved with a man she works with. He too is married, so their time together is limited. They look forward to the business trips they manage to take together several times a year. On one of these, the woman decided after a few days that she wanted to go skiing. The man was not a skier and in any event had further work to do in Boston, “I decided that I should ski by myself, she told me [Dowling]. “I got on a bus in the middle of the afternoon and as we wound up into the Vermont mountains, it began to snow. I remember sitting by myself on this greyhound bus, looking out the window and watching the lights come on in the little towns we passed through. I felt so good, so secure in the knowledge that I could be myself, do what I want – *and also be loved* – I started to cry.”²⁰

Marabel Morgan is greeting Charlie in pink babydoll pajamas at dinnertime while her children watch. The “Chicago woman” leaves her husband for her lover, then leaves her lover, to ride a greyhound bus up a mountain alone. One is in the thick of family life, the other pretty far outside it. One is acting; the other enjoying, perhaps, the release from acting. Morgan values “fun”; Dowling, aliveness and self-understanding.

Morgan is on stage, Dowling's Chicago woman is off stage. In their magnified moments, Morgan's husband is the audience, while Dowling's husband functions more as a stage. The drama in the Chicago woman's magnified moment doesn't take place between herself and her husband, but between her desire to be attached and her desire to be independent. Dowling's drama does not take place through the enactment of a social role but in an emotional space quite outside her regular life and beyond the labors of love. For even when she is off stage, away from her marriage, she's not working on her “intense affair”. The focus moves to her feeling in the bus, the mountains, the snow, the anonymous context within which she feels attached but independent. She comes alive focusing inward – figuring out a troubled boundary between herself and anyone else.²¹ Her feelings are in response to thinking about relationships, not in response to enacting them. If Morgan is inspired by her own success at breathing life into monogamous marriage, the Chicago woman is inspired, perhaps, by daring to challenge it.

Who is on the scene in the Chicago woman's epiphany? She's honest. But who is she honest with? Her husband? Her lover? Her children? A close friend? A community of women? None of these; elsewhere we discover a somewhat people-less career, and the idea of exertion, excelling. Her exertion is private and internal, against her very dependency on others.

For Dowling we're our best when we are by ourselves facing the elements alone, as in the myth of the cowboy, the Jack London trapper in a forest, Hemingway's man and the sea. Others of Dowling's positive moments are stories about women being sprung free into professional success, erotic freedom and autonomy.²² In her final chapter, she describes a scene from the life of Simone de Beauvoir who broke her dependence on her life's partner, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, through a series of fierce missions “climbing every peak, clambering down every gully . . . exploring every valley . . . around Marseille, through challenging solitary ten hour hikes, 25 miles each day . . . Simone de Beauvoir's hikes became both the method and the metaphor of her rebirth as an individual”, Dowling says. Quoting de Beauvoir she said, “Alone I walked the mists that hung over the summit of Sainte Victoire, and trod along the ridge of the Pilon de Roi, bracing

myself against a violent wind which sent my beret spinning down into the valley below . . .” “When I was clambering over rocks and mountains or sliding down scree, I would work out shortcuts, so that each expedition was a work of art in itself.” Once she charged up a steep gorge, unable to go back the way she came, but, having reached a fault in the rock, unable to jump across. Backtracking down the treacherous rocks, triumphantly she concludes, “*I knew that I could now rely on myself.*”²³

In her most dreadful moment, Dowling feels the opposite of this. She begins the book with this passage:

I am lying alone on the third floor of our house with a bad bout of the flu, trying to keep my illness from the others. The room feels large and cold and as the hours pass, strangely inhospitable. I begin to remember myself as a little girl, small, vulnerable, help less. By the time night falls I am utterly miserable, not so sick with flu as with anxiety. “What am I doing here, so solitary, so unattached, so...floating?” I ask myself. How strange to be so disturbed, cut off from family, from my busy, demanding life...disconnected . . .²⁴

More than air and energy and life itself what I want is to be safe, warm, taken care of.

This desire to be “safe, warm, taken care of . . .” forms the basis of the dreaded “Cinderella Complex” which, Dowling goes on to generalize, is the “chief force holding women down today.”²⁵ Elsewhere in the book, Dowling points to the waste of brains when women don't have careers. She cites the Stanford Gifted Child Study of 600 California children with IQs above 135. She notes that most male geniuses have had high level professional careers while most women geniuses have not.²⁶ This isn't good for society, she says, nor fair to women; in this, Dowling's advice book is clearly feminist and modern.

The Total Woman and *The Cinderella Complex* are guided by different inspirations. Morgan tries to have fun, she likes to act and feel exuberantly playful in the confines of a unitary patriarchal world. The dangerous feelings for her are anger, assertiveness, strivings outside the home, feelings which do not fit a patriarchal world. Dowling, on the other hand, strives to be honest with herself, to control and tame her needs, in a sparsely populated and socially dispersed world. For her, the

dangerous feeling is the desire to be “safe, warm and taken care of”. Indeed, her fear of being dependent on another person evokes the image of the American cowboy, alone, detached, roaming free with his horse. The American cowboy has long been a model for men struggling against the constraints of corporate capitalism. Now Dowling embraces this ideal for women. On the ashes of Cinderella, then, rises a postmodern cowgirl.

The two authors differ in their ideas about what is exciting: attaching yourself to a man or detaching yourself from him. They differ in their policies toward emotion management; one advises women to suppress any assertion of will in the service of binding them to men. The other advises women to suppress any feeling that would bind them to men too closely. They differ in the place they accord autonomy in the ideal feminine self and ultimately in their views about danger and safety in the world for women.

Although the advice books I’ve studied don’t line up in the same rows on all dimensions, if we sort them according to their views on the role of women, roughly a third lean toward the “traditional” model. Examples are the humorous Erma Bombeck’s *Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession* (1983), her *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* (1976) or James Dobson’s *Parenting Isn’t for Cowards* (1987). Roughly two-thirds lean toward the modern model, of which *The Cinderella Complex* (1981) is an especially individualistic example. We find a lighter, more saucy version of it in Helen Gurley Brown’s *Having It All* (1982). Equally searching but less focused on autonomy are Susan Forward and Joan Torres’s *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them* (1987), Robin Norwood’s *Women Who Love Too Much* (1985), C. Cowan and M. Kinder’s *Smart Women, Foolish Choices* (1985) and Barbara De Angelis’s *Secrets About Men Every Woman Should Know* (1990).

Most of these “modern” books whisper to the reader, “let the emotional investor beware”. If Morgan counsels women to accumulate domestic capital and invest at home, Dowling cautions women to invest them in the self as a solo enterprise. Most advice books of the 1970s and 1980s are spin-offs or mixtures of these two investment strategies. Gaining the edge during this period, then, is the postmodern cowgirl who devotes herself to the ascetic practices of emotional control, and expects to give and receive surprisingly little love from other human beings.

A handful of books are “warm moderns”, emphasizing equality and social attachment, sharing and commitment. Examples are the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective’s *Ourselves and Our Children*, and Harriet Lerner’s *The Dance of Anger*. It is my impression – though I’ve not

taken a systematic look at women's advice books since 1990 – that this genre of “warm modern” books has expanded. Still, it has expanded by weaving, rather than integrating, these two sets of cultural premises. I believe that cultural weave goes on today.

The Cool Modern and the Commercial Spirit of Intimate Life

Cool modern advice books reveal a newly unfolding paradox that is reminiscent of an earlier paradox. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber describes a set of beliefs held by a variety of Protestant sects – a belief in ascetic self-control, frugality, hard work and devotion to a calling. He traces the way in which these *religious* ideas were adapted to a material purpose. The idea of devotion to a calling came to mean devotion to making money. The idea of self-control came to mean careful saving, spending and capital reinvestment. The Protestant Ethic “escaped the cage” to become part of a new hybrid “spirit of capitalism”.²⁷

Comparing the origin of these motivational ideas and their ultimate destination, Weber made this significant comment:

Today the spirit of religious asceticism – whether finally, who knows? – has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.²⁸

The original religious ideas jumped the churchyard fence to land in the marketplace. Luther and Calvin would have been aghast at the jump their ideas took. As Weber notes, delicately but wryly:

...it is not to be understood that we expect to find any of the founders or representatives of these religious movements considering the promotion of what we have called the spirit of capitalism as in any sense the end of his life work. We cannot well maintain that the pursuit of worldly goods, conceived as an end in itself, was to any of them of positive ethical value.²⁹

Work devoted to a calling as the religious fathers originally intended it was a task set by God and it led to “salvation”. In Benjamin Franklin's capitalist hands (his 1736 advice book was called *Necessary Hints to Those Who Would Be Rich*), a calling led elsewhere.

Now, has another set of beliefs “jumped” another “fence”? Is a more marginal belief system, feminism, “escaping from the cage” of a social movement to buttress *a commercial spirit of intimate life*? The feminism represented, for example, by Charlotte Gilman or Lucretia Mott, or by the mid-1970s second wave feminism whose thinking is recently reflected in the bestselling advice book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* has “escaped the cage” into a commercial arena. Like Calvin, the feminist founders might have worried at the cultural trends weaving themselves around their core ideals. Equality yes, they might say were they alive today, but why allow the worst of capitalist culture to establish the *cultural basis*? Autonomy yes, they might say, but the stand-alone cowgirl; why?

The analogy, then, is this. Feminism is to the commercial spirit of intimate life as Protestantism is to the spirit of capitalism. The first legitimates the second. The second borrows from but also transforms the first. Just as certain prior conditions prepared the soil for the spirit of capitalism to “take off” – the decline of feudalism, the growth of cities, the rising middle class – so, too, certain prior conditions ripen the soil for the “take off” of the commercial spirit of intimate life. The preconditions now are a weakening of the family, the decline of the church and loss of local community – traditional shields against the harsher effects of capitalism.

Given this backdrop, a commercial culture has moved in, silently borrowing from feminism an ideology that made way for women in public life. From feminism these books draw a belief in the equal worth of men and women. Modern books begin with the idea that women think too little of themselves. Their human needs are not met. The authors of these books genuinely seek, I believe, to “uplift women”, to raise women's worth in their own eyes and the eyes of others. This idea is what makes cool modern books *modern*. This idea of equality makes them a powerful challenge to Marabel Morgan; it's what makes her advice seem old fashioned, invalid, silly.

What advice books blend with feminism, however, is a commercial spirit of intimate life. And here I move well beyond analogy. For, it seems also true that part of the *content* of the spirit of capitalism is being *displaced* onto intimate life; this is, in fact, partly what the commercial spirit of intimate life *is*. The ascetic self-discipline which the early capitalist applied to his bank account, the late twentieth-century woman applies to her appetite, her body, her love. The devotion to a

“calling” which the early capitalist applied to earning money, the latter day woman applies to “having it all”. The activism, the belief in working hard and aiming high, the desire to go for it, to be saved, to win, to succeed, which the early capitalists used to build capitalism in a rough and tumble marketplace, many advice books urge women to transfer to love in a rapidly changing courtship pool.

The commercial spirit of intimate life is made up of images which prepare the way for a paradigm of distrust. These are images of “me” and “you” and “us” which are psychologically defended and shallow. It is also made up of a way of relating to others associated with the paradigm, a spirit of instrumental detachment that fits the emptied slots where a deeper “me”, “you” and “us” might be.

Cool modern books prepare the self for a commercial spirit of intimate life by offering as ideal a self well defended against getting hurt. In Dowling's worst magnified moment, she leaps away in fright from her own desire to be “safe, warm, comforted”. She ardently seeks to develop the capacity to endure emotional isolation. Parallel to the image of the low-needs self, is the image of the self that ministers to itself. Who helps the self? The answer is the self. In Appendix 4 of Robin Norwood's *Women Who Love Too Much*, she offers private affirmations, “Twice daily, for three minutes each time, maintain eye contact with yourself in a mirror as you *say out loud*, “(your name), I love you and accept you exactly the way you are.”³⁰ The heroic acts a self can perform, in this view, are to detach, to leave and to depend and need less. The emotion work that matters is control of the feelings of fear, vulnerability and the desire to be comforted. The ideal self doesn't need much, and what it does need it can get for itself.

Added to the idea of a curtailed “me” is the idea of a curtailed “you”. So a no-needs me relates to a no-needs you and a paradigm of caution is stationed between the two. A woman who loves a man may have a “need to control” or be a “man junkie.”³¹ In many cool modern books, the author prepares us for people out there who don't need our nurturance, and for people who don't or can't nurture us. Norwood catalogs cases of women who love men who drink too much, men who beat them up, men who run around, men who use them and leave. Drawing a general picture of the dysfunctional man and relationship, she proposes a general *paradigm of caution*. If we accept the cases, she implies, we should accept the paradigm. If we take the position that some men hurt some women, a position many of us, including myself would take, we find ourselves on a slippery slope sliding gradually down to a paradigm of caution.

While books like *Women Who Love Too Much* focus on therapy, ironically the actual process of healing is subtracted from the image of normal family or communal bonds. The women in Norwood's tales seem to live in a wider community strikingly barren of emotional support. Actual healing is reserved for a separate zone of paid professionals where people have PhDs, MDs, MAs, accept money, and have special therapeutic identities. While psychotherapy is surely a help to many, it is no substitute for life itself. In the picture Norwood paints, there is little power of healing *outside* of therapy. In the stories Norwood tells, love doesn't heal. When you give it, it doesn't take. When another offers it, it may feel good but it's not good for you. In fact, in the second paragraph of the Preface, Norwood declares that if "we try to become his (a loved one's) therapist, we are loving too much."³² If the word "therapy" conveys the desire to help another to get to the root of a problem, this is a deep subtraction from our idea of love and friendship. It thins and lightens our idea of love. We are invited to confine our trust to the thinner, once a week, "processed" concern of the professional. This may add to our expectations of therapy, but it lightens our expectations of lovers, family and friends. Cool modern books put a value on this lightness. The idea of liberation and independence that early feminists applied to the right to vote, to learn and to work, the cool moderns apply to the right to emotionally detach.

Given these images of "me" and "you", we are more prepared to accept the spirit of commercialism. This spirit instrumentalizes our idea of love and commercializes it. To be sure, nothing is new about instrumentalism. As *The Total Woman* shows, under patriarchy women learned to "catch their man in the right mood to ask for a new hat". They used flattery and feminine wiles.

The decline of patriarchy has not eliminated instrumentalism. It has recast it into a new, commercial mold. The people in stories similar to the *The Cinderella Complex* and *Women Who Love Too Much* tell us to "stop acting,"³³ to value honesty and authenticity, and this is part of what makes them feel "modern". But ironically, what many are honest about is "authentic" instrumentalism. For example, Norwood tells readers honestly how to shop around for a less needy guy, preferably a man with non-alcoholic parents. Just as characters in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* shrewdly appraise the bank accounts and social lineage of their suitors, so Norwood urges women to consider their suitors' psychological capital. The difference is more than an update. Norwood's attempt to give her readers a "clear head" about love goes with a readiness to detach, to

leave, to turn inward toward oneself. For Jane Austen, family and community are confining; for Norwood, they are barely there at all.

Each cool modern book offers a slightly different version of the commercial culture. Some express a theme of production, others a theme of consumption. In *Having It All*, Helen Gurley Brown does both, by focusing on the production of the body she displays as a ware. In the nearly one third of *Having It All* that she devotes to the female face, hair, body – exercise, diet – and dress, she proposes a policy of “investment” in the bodily self.³⁴ Brown tells women what to do: dye your hair. Get a face lift. Diet. These practices should be done neither in the spirit of a purification rite, nor in the spirit of devotion to a particular person, but to look good to an anonymous market of men within a 30-yard radius. She helps women advertise themselves to a diversified market. The light office affairs she recommends are those of a sexual venture capitalist, a diversified, high risk, high opportunity portfolio.

In *Women Who Love Too Much*, Robin Norwood expresses more the theme of consumption. She advises women how to “spend” their nurturance in the relational marketplace. Although the language is therapeutic, the spirit is that of a shrewd investment counselor. Don't waste your love, Norwood cautions, on a poor investment. In her cautionary tales, stories of unhappy patients who “loved too much”, one woman after another “wastes” her love and lacks a return commensurate to her devotion, attention and love. “Divest”, she cautions, “Cut your losses. Invest elsewhere.”

In *The Cinderella Complex*, Colette Dowling takes yet a third tack. Instead of focusing as Norwood does on women who love too much, Dowling concentrates on women who need too much. Displacing the spirit of capitalism onto private life, cool modern advice books for women both reinforce and create a commercial culture of intimate life. As a result, we may have global warming, but we have a cultural cooling.

Assimilating to Male Rules of Love

The commercial spirit of intimate life is woven with a second cultural tendency – for women to assimilate to male rules of love. On one hand, cool modern advice books address women. Two-thirds are written by women and all of them address problems women have. Nearly all picture women on the covers. Further, if the author doesn't claim to be a feminist at the outset, authors refer

to “progress”, “struggle”, “independence”, “equality” – code words for core ideas of “feminism”. Many portray women as victims who need to be freed from oppressive situations in love or work.

Curiously, though, such books simultaneously recycle the feeling rules that once applied to middle-class men of the 1950s. In doing so, they illustrate a pattern common to many stratification systems – of the “bottom” emulating the “top” in order to gain access to its greater respect, authority and power. Insofar as imitation represents in part a magical solution to redistribution of respect and power, female emulation of “male” emotional folkways is useless. In addition, it also means that women are encouraged to be “cooler” while men are not in equal measure urged to become “warmer”. In this sense, advice books conserve the already capitalized male culture. They conserve the damage capitalism did to manhood instead of *critiquing* it, in the tradition set out ninety years ago by Charlotte Gilman.

In recycling male rules of love, modern advice books for women assert that it's a “feminine” practice to subordinate the importance of love, to delay falling in love until after consolidating a career, to separate love from sex, and for married women to have occasional affairs.

For one thing, these books propose that love should play an altogether less central role than it has had in the lives of women, and that women should rid themselves of ideas about the importance of love, “de-culturize” themselves in Bourdieu's terms, to unlearn the idea that “love to man is a thing apart, 'tis woman's whole existence”.

Love should also occur later in life than before. In the 1950s it was middle-class men who waited until they were occupationally prepared to “fall in love and settle down”. Love that occurred earlier was “too early”. Wait, advice books for women now caution, until your late 20s or 30s, when you are trained in a career, until you are “ready” to fall in love. Now this delay in the timing of love, and the emotion management needed to delay, is recommended to women as well.

Just as love has been more easily separated from sex for men, so these advice books of the 1980s suggest, love can be separated from sex for women. In *Having It All*, Helen Gurley Brown tells readers how to avoid getting “too” emotionally involved with the married men at the office they sleep with. In the past, if premarital and extramarital sex were not actually affirmed for men, they were understood as manly flaws. Now, as Dowling's Chicago woman suggests, it's a “womanly flaw” too.

Thus, in the lesser role of love, in the separation of love from sex, in the delay in the “right time” to fall in love, and in the feminization of adultery, advice books of the 1980s propose to

women the emotional rules that were part of the gendered cultural capital of white middle-class men of the 1950s. We've moved from living according to two emotional codes – one for men and another for women – to a unisex code based on the old code for men. We've also moved from a “warmer” code to a cooler one that both fits with and exacerbates a move to lighter family bonds.

Many authors of many advice books conceive of their books as feminist, but are in reality an abduction of feminism. Many advice books see their patients, their interviewees, their readers as patients. But, could it be that it's the commercial spirit of intimate life that's really sick?

Exceptions and Counter-Trends

A look at advice books for men would surely offer a more cheerful picture, since while women have been moving toward a male norm, some men have moved in the other direction. But since the traditional “male” culture that progressive men are challenging is still associated with power and authority, I believe women's move in the direction of traditional male culture is still stronger than men's move in the opposite direction.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the books pushing a pro-commercial spirit seemed to be winning. In the 1990s, with the renewal of “family values” – a phrase that means all things to all people – the anti-commercial ones seem to be gaining ground. Hitting the bestseller list are such books as *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*³⁵ which exaggerates the differences between men and women but offers practical tips on “inter-species” communication and commitment. In *A Woman's Worth*, Marianne Williamson proclaims women to be queens and goddesses, weirdly combining a moral social mobility” – the purpose of life as a woman is to ascend to the throne and rule with heart”³⁶ – a call for family and community and a paradigm of distrust. While women are asked in a general way to love “our communities, our families, our friends”, in the end, the only love they can really count on, according to Williamson, is God's.³⁷

Meanwhile, a smaller-sales stream of books continues the commercial spirit without a communal gloss. Joyce Vedral's *Get Rid of Him*, Susan Rabin's *How to Attract Anyone, Anytime, Anyplace*, an extension of her “flirtation seminars”, extend the psychological frontier of commercialism.³⁸ They complement the increasingly popular mail order video cassettes on marital sex, often authoritatively introduced by PhD psychologists in the spirit of a science class. While

such videos legitimate the importance of female sexual pleasure, they would also seem to subtract something.

Both the counter-trend and the continued drum beat of the commercial spirit of intimate life pose the question: will the anti-commercial books toss out feminism? Or will they stop the abduction of feminism, only to flatten and commercialize it? Or will they integrate it with a paradigm of trust?

Conclusion

In *The Second Shift*, I have argued that American families are strained by the fact that they serve as a shock absorber of a stalled gender revolution. The move of masses of women into the paid workforce has constituted a revolution. But the slower shift in ideas of “manhood”, the resistance to sharing work at home, the rigid schedules at work make for a “stall” in this gender revolution.³⁹ It is a stall in the change of institutional arrangements of which men are the principal keepers. But if we are at the same time undergoing a cultural cooling, then we are faced with another, almost opposite, problem. It isn't simply that men are changing too slowly, but that, without quite realizing it, women are also changing in the opposite direction – in the sense of “assimilating” – too fast. Instead of humanizing men, we are “capitalizing” women. If the concept of the “stalled revolution” raises the question of how to be equal, the concept of the commercial spirit of intimate life raises the question: equal on what terms?

With an American divorce rate of 50 percent, and with 60 percent of marriages formed in the 1980s projected to end, two-thirds of them involving children, many young women today are the single mothers of tomorrow. Given this, we have to ask, isn't it *useful* for women to know how to meet their emotional needs on their own? Isn't it useful to have a defended “me” hoping to meet a defended “you”? Even if *The Cinderella Complex* is selling defective psychic armor – these days sadly enough we have to ask if we don't need it. Even defective armor, that helps us get around in a cool world, can be useful. But after we've asked whether “being cool” is useful, we have to ask whether “being cool” is good. Is it the best we can do? If we think not, then we have to ask the question advice books pose but don't ask – how can we re-wire the broader conditions that make us need the tough armor they provide? On that we could really use good advice.

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Endnotes

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¹ Norwood, 1985: 238

² Weber (1958)

³ I use the term “commercial spirit of intimate life” to refer not to the exchange of things for money, but to refer to the *culture* governing personal relationships that accompanies advanced capitalism. Thanks to Cas Wouters on this point. Insofar as middle-class men have already been urged to subordinate love to work – to “capitalize” love – we can see women's shift from a less to a more commercialized ethic of intimate life as a shift from female to male rules of love. Unwittingly, advice books make the “emotional investment strategy”, that formerly fit middle-class heterosexual men of the 1950s, seem “feminine” as well as “liberated”. Many recent advice books recycle male feeling rules to women. The effect of this is likely to be double – to adapt women to an era of the fragile family, and to induce women to make it more fragile.

⁴ Fromm, 1956; Weber, 1976:181

⁵ A recent Gallup poll showed that one out of three Americans has bought a “self-help book” (Wood, 1988). Steven Starker, whose telephone survey of 1000 residents of Portland found that women were more frequent readers of self-help books than men, although he doesn't cite exact figures. He found his sample averaged 2.82 self-help books a year. Women were slightly more likely to buy a self-help book, and bought more books on love and relationships, stress and anxiety and weight loss while men bought more on self-improvement and motivation. Working women were nearly twice as likely as non-working women to buy books on self-improvement, motivation and love and relationships; both working and non-working women were equally prone to buy books on stress and anxiety (10 percent vs. 11 percent) (see Starker, 1989; Radway, 1984; Long, 1986). Simonds (1992: ch. 1) interviewed 30 readers, mostly white, employed, middle-class in income and education, two-thirds single or divorced. All of the bestsellers focused on heterosexual love; we lack data on the sexual orientation of readers and lack research on gay and lesbian advice books.

⁶ Lasch, 1977

⁷ Giddens, 1991

⁸ In his classic book *Distinction* (1984), Pierre Bourdieu spoke of “cultural agents”, or intermediaries, who actively shape, rather than passively transmit, culture. Writers of advice books are “cultural intermediaries”. (Most authors of the books I studied were women, and the most common professions were psychologist, counselor and writer.) Bourdieu applies an economizing metaphor to culture – “cultural capital” – which turns culture into something we have or we don't have – like table manners, the art of conversation and self-confidence (1984: 4). I use the term “culture” to refer to a set of practices and beliefs which, consciously or not, we deploy. But I also believe that we partly are what we “deploy”.

⁹ Simonds, 1992

¹⁰ For this study, I selected books from a list of hardback or paperback, trade and mass market books found in Ben Bowker's *Eighty Years of Best Sellers*, and in *Publishers' Weekly*. (The criteria used by *Publishers' Weekly* to determine a bestseller changed through the years and I have followed its changes.) I selected books which were addressed to women, or centrally concerned women's personal or work lives. I excluded diet books, inspirational or self-development books which did not address or directly bear on women. Books excluded from the list which I read, but didn't study, include non-bestselling advice books for women and advice books for men.

The original list includes a “core” of pure advice books modeled on psychotherapy or on a social science study based on interviews. Examples of this type are Susan Forward and Joan Torres' *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them* (1987). Adopting the metaphors of “sickness” and “healing”, which psychiatry itself adopted from medicine, these advice books tell stories of patients' emotional problems and their cures. Other books quote and interpret hundreds of interviews and report the “findings”.

The list also includes a second type of book which focuses on social practices – dress, manner – with little discussion of the animating ideas or motives behind them. An example of this type would be Judith Martin's *Guide to Raising Perfect Children* (1984) or Abigail Van Buren's *The Best of Dear Abby* (1981). A more diverse third group of books includes autobiography, humor and commentary. Examples include Bill Cosby's *Love and Marriage* (1989), Erma Bombeck's *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* (1976) and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Ourselves and Our Children*. (For cross-cultural comparisons, see Brinkgreve, 1962; Brinkgreve and Korzec, 1979; Elias, 1978; Wouters, 1987.)

Although I focus on books published between 1970 and 1990, a look back to the turn of the century reveals three types of books, of which the 1970-90 collection reflects two. The three types are traditionals, tradition-for-moderns and moderns. By tradition-for-moderns, I refer to advice books which curiously mix a belief in male dominance with an appeal to modern goals ('increased female power') and/or a evocation of modern dilemmas. Modern advice books, as I define the term here, advocate equality between the sexes. For a study of nineteenth-century advice books, see Ehrenreich and English (1978). An example of a “plain” traditional advice book is Grace Dodge's (1892) *Thoughts of Busy Girls* which explains the value of modesty, purity, altruism, dedication,

capacity for moral reform, without appeals to empowerment, freedom, equality, and without reference to the fear, once married, of being left.

¹¹ See Lasch 1977, Swidler 1980, and Cancian 1987

¹² Harrington and Bielby 1991

¹³ See Kaminer 1992, Simmons 1992, Tavis 1993

¹⁴ Morgan 1973. Dowling 1981.

¹⁵ Morgan, 1973: 114-15

¹⁶ Morgan, 1973:123

¹⁷ Morgan, 1973: 89

¹⁸ Morgan, 1973: 11-12

¹⁹ Morgan, 1973: 73

²⁰ Dowling, 1981: 237

²¹ Chodorow, 1978

²² Weber's thesis has attracted various criticisms. Some have argued that capitalism existed in some places before the rise of Protestantism, that there were Catholic capitalists. But these criticisms don't bear on the association I seek to focus on here – which is between Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism and not between either of these and Capitalism itself.

²³ Dowling, 1981: 233-234

²⁴ Dowling, 1981:1

²⁵ Dowling, 1981:21

²⁶ Dowling, 1981: 32

²⁷ Weber, 1958

²⁸ Weber, 1958: 182

²⁹ Weber, 1958: 89

³⁰ Norwood, 1985: 292

³¹ Norwood, 1985: 139, 181

³² Norwood, 1985: xiii

³³ Norwood, 1985: 274

³⁴ Brown, 1982

³⁵ Gray 1982

³⁶ Williamson, 1993: 11

³⁷ Williamson, 1993: 46

³⁸ Vedral 1993, Rabin 1993

³⁹ Hochschild 1989