



ÉRIC SMADJA

THE COUPLE

A pluridisciplinary story

The Couple

The Couple: A pluridisciplinary story asks two questions and endeavours to answer them: What is the couple? And what story are we talking about?

Éric Smadja presents his view of “the couple” as a composite, sexual-bodily, socio-cultural and psychic living reality in diverse and variable interrelationships, unfolding within a complex temporality. Ambivalently invested in by each partner, the couple is structurally and dynamically as conflictual as it is critical.

Smadja sees the couple as situated at the intersection of several histories: socio-cultural; epistemological (the construction of this object of knowledge and of psychoanalytic treatment); “natural” (that of the cycle of conjugal life marked out by critical and mutative stages) and therapeutic (that of the suffering couple that will consult a specialist and undergo psychoanalytic therapy). *The Couple: A pluridisciplinary story* follows the narrative division of these histories following a pluri- and interdisciplinary investigation combining historical, anthropological, sociological and psychoanalytic approaches. It enables the reader to structure the outline of a general, but irreducibly heterogeneous, picture of the couple, and by so doing, Smadja is able to develop new interdisciplinary concepts, in particular those of *couple work* and *conjugal culture*. In the final part of the book, he presents a full case study and introduces new technical aspects of this psychoanalytic work.

This unique approach to the study of the couple as a unit will appeal to psychoanalysts, especially those working with couples, psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, students and academics of psychoanalytic studies, anthropology and sociology.

Éric Smadja is a psychiatrist, a psychoanalyst, a member of the Société Psychanalytique de Paris and of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), a couples psychoanalyst, and also an anthropologist and associate member of the American Anthropological Association. In 2007, he was awarded the IPA’s Prize for “Exceptional Contribution Made to Psychoanalytic Research.” He is the author of several books, many of which have been translated into English.

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A pluridisciplinary story

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First published in French 2011
By Presses Universitaires de France

First published in English 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© Presses Universitaires de France, *Le Couple et Son Histoire*

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Names: Smadja, Éric.

Title: The couple : a pluridisciplinary story / Éric Smadja.

Other titles: Couple et son histoire. English

Description: 1 Edition. | New York : Routledge, 2016. | First published in France 2011. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015046999 | ISBN 9781138645721 (hardback) | ISBN 9781138645745 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781315627977 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Couples. | Couples—Psychology. | Man-woman relationships—Social aspects.

Classification: LCC HQ801 .S626513 2016 | DDC 306.7—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015046999>

ISBN: 978-1-138-64572-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-64574-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-62797-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

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By way of introduction

The Couple: A pluridisciplinary story asks two questions and endeavors to answer them: What is the couple? And what story are we talking about?

Many writers, poets, novelists, philosophers, essayists, scientists, specialists in diverse fields, have explored this complex, composite reality that is the human heterosexual, as well as homosexual, couple. They have often confined their investigations and their discourse to one or a few aspects of the couple, associating it with: love, its nuances and inevitable vicissitudes; its components, processes and psychic productions; its sexual life, with its principles and its dysfunctions; the institution of marriage, its history, its rules, the ways it is portrayed and its culturally variable practices; the biological and social unit of reproduction; the unit of breeding and bringing up children (the parental couple); as well as the unit of economic and social cooperation based on a sexual distribution of common tasks; its history, with the changes and sociological characteristics of contemporary couples; legal aspects conferring status, rights and obligations to certain forms of conjugal – marital and non-marital, heterosexual and homosexual – union.

These many contributions to the subject have undeniably enriched our knowledge of the human couple. Nevertheless, they have done so compartmentally, leaving us, then, without the unified picture we are most in need of today, all the more so as we very frequently hear people talking, and without clearly identifiable reasons, about “couples in crisis,” about the “crisis of contemporary couples,” much as, moreover, we speak of “Western society in crisis,” the two being inevitably inseparable.

Indeed, although considerably broadened and diversified, our present-day knowledge is thereby broken up correlatively. Yet the couple, as I view it in the present work, is a living human reality that is necessarily complex, because it is composite, integrating, like any other human reality, several orders of reality and situated at the intersection of several approaches.

Let me specify that I shall be dealing with heterosexual couples but that I shall, nonetheless, present some sociological information regarding homosexual couples in our times.

Thus, I shall envisage the socio-cultural, psychic and sexual-bodily dimensions unfolding within a complex temporality, whose interconnections, following modalities yet to be defined, will make this so enigmatic conjugal reality more

comprehensible overall. To this end, I shall necessarily undertake a pluri- and interdisciplinary investigation, combining historical, anthropological, sociological and psychoanalytic approaches, which I hope will lead to much greater intelligibility because of its patently heuristic value. In addition, each one of these approaches will draw together the points of view of different experts.

In that regard, I am pursuing a research approach that I first used in my first book on laughter,¹ which has proved to be scientifically fruitful. I adopted it again in my preceding work,² which, taking the Œdipus complex as its point of departure, dealt with a historical and epistemological approach to the relationship between psychoanalysis and anthropology, and which has already inquired into the conditions conducive to engaging in pluri- and interdisciplinary research. On this point, I gladly take my place in an imaginary intellectual line of descent peopled by different thinkers, among them Sigmund Freud, Marcel Mauss, Géza Róheim, Georges Devereux and, more recently, Edgar Morin, especially. Remember that Mauss (1924) already defined all social facts as being “total”³, because they integrate multiple, interdependent components – historical, economic, political, ideological, technological, ecological and those involving kinship, for example – whose discovery made those facts intelligible. Moreover, he advocated an exploration of the “total” person, with his or her historical, socio-cultural, bodily and psychic dimensions, the latter, however, involving a psychological, non-psychoanalytic investigation, with regard to which he expressed reticence based on serious lack of understanding. I share his viewpoint concerning the exploration of the “total person” using our contemporary scientific knowledge and methods, and underpinned by a solid epistemological reflection, procuring for us conditions conducive to pluri- and interdisciplinary research.

But the couple is also situated, as I said, at the intersection of several histories that I am proposing to discuss: socio-cultural; epistemological (the construction of this object of knowledge and of psychoanalytic treatment); “natural” (that of the cycle of conjugal life marked off by critical and mutative stages); and, finally, therapeutic (that of the suffering couple that will consult a specialist and undergo psychoanalytic therapy).

So, *The Couple: A pluridisciplinary story* will follow the narrative division of several histories chosen and dealt with following a pluri- and interdisciplinary approach that will enable us to compare specialized discourses and identify certain convergences, divergences and complementarities, contributing, then, to structuring the outline of a general, but irreducibly heterogeneous, picture of the couple.

The history, the social organization of every society, its diverse social relationships, the multiple symbolic systems that it elaborates and produces, the modalities of its self-preservation, of its production and reproduction envelop and structure this human reality that is the couple. That is why I have first of all chosen, in Chapter 1, to peel away its historical and socio-cultural envelope.

Then, in Chapter 2, I plan to go through certain stages of the genesis of the construction of this new epistemological object – an object of psychoanalytic knowledge and of treatment that the couple has become in our contemporary Western society characterized by prevalent individualism. It is, moreover, this

social individualism that has made possible the emergence of the Western couple, distinguishing itself from the institutional framework of marriage. Via the “antagonism” of individual and conjugal interests, we shall find again the primordial antagonism between the individual and society, which Emile Durkheim (1893) explored so well,⁴ at the heart of the contemporary couple.

Chapter 3, which deals with the couple’s fundamental psychic components, is exclusively psychoanalytical. It enables one to demonstrate the full complexity of the conscious, preconscious and unconscious psychic reality present through its “materials” and at work in the organization and functioning of every couple. In addition, it prepares one for the discovery and intelligibility of its “natural” history.

Chapter 4 recounts, therefore, this “natural” history through certain particularly significant periods chosen for their “mutative” and maturing critical characteristics. Here, I regularly compare several approaches – anthropological, sociological and psychoanalytic.

This is where my pluri- and interdisciplinary approach, which attempts consistently to connect the discourse of specialists with particular conceptions formulated about well-circumscribed aspects, becomes pertinent to today’s realities in the clearest way. Readers will then grow aware of the radical heterogeneity of certain points of view reflecting such different and such conflictualized orders of reality organizing all human reality. They will thus attempt to unify them.

In Chapter 5, I present and develop a new concept of an interdisciplinary nature, that of *couple work*, a psychoanalytical and socio-anthropological concept, by which I endeavor to demonstrate the couple’s pluri-dimensionality, modes of connecting its diverse levels, its organization and its functioning, but also its dysfunctioning. It is a matter of a “working” hypothesis, whose value as a mode of operation will have to be evaluated.

Finally, the last chapter retraces the course taken by suffering couples who finally decide to ask for help by consulting a specialist, a therapist for couples, particularly one trained in psychoanalysis. I shall describe its principal phases, from the circumstances of the first consultation to the objectives and benefits expected of psychoanalytic therapy with couples. I offer readers a clinical illustration through Martine and Louis, one of the many couples I have received.

By the time I reach the end of these many historical accounts, as well as of this pluri- and interdisciplinary exploration of the couple, I shall certainly have challenged a certain number of obvious facts that seem to me to have become “natural,” while they resulted from historically, socio-culturally and psychically constructed processes.

Notes

- 1 Eric Smadja (2013), *Laughter*. London: College Publications. Translation of *Le Rire*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1993, 1996, 2007, 2011.
- 2 Eric Smadja (2009), *Le complexe d’Edipe, cristallisateur du débat psychoanalyse/anthropologie*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- 3 Marcel Mauss (1924), “Essai sur le don,” in *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950, pp. 145–279.
- 4 Emile Durkheim (1893), *Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press, 1997.

The couple's historical and socio-cultural envelope

Linguistic considerations regarding marriage and couples

On marriage

In the chapter entitled “The Indo-European Expression for ‘Marriage’” of his book *Indo-European Language and Society*,¹ the linguist Emile Benveniste wrote that the Indo-European vocabulary surrounding kinship, for as long as it has been studied, has taught that in conjugality the situation of the man and that of the woman had nothing in common, just as the terms designating their respective kinship were completely different. *This is why there is not, strictly speaking, any Indo-European term for “marriage.”*² In fact, the expressions found today would all be secondary creations, be it *mariage* (in French), *Ehe* (in German) or *brak* (in Russian), for example. In ancient languages, the facts seem to him to be more specific, and it would be of interest to tackle them in their diversity. Thus, the terms differ, especially, according to whether it is a matter of a man, for whom they would be *verbs*, or a woman, for whom they would be *nouns*.

According to Benveniste, to say that a man “takes a wife,” Indo-European language uses the forms of the verbal root *wedh-* “to lead,” especially “to lead a woman to the home.” This particular meaning would be the result of close correspondences obtaining among most languages. Such was the expression in the most ancient state, and when certain languages renewed the notion of “to lead,” the new verb also became the equivalent of “to marry (a woman).” This is what happened in Indo-Iranian, for example. In Latin, we find a new verb having the meaning of “to lead.” It is *ducere*, which also acquires the meaning of “to marry” in *uxorem ducere*.

Those verbs referring to the role of the girl's father in the marriage, or for want of one, that of the brother, correspond to: “giving” the girl to her husband. “To give” is the verb consistently used for this solemn act; one finds it from one language to another, with at the very most some variations in the verb's prefix.

Benveniste argues that this consistency shows the persistence of ritual practices inherited from a common history and the same family structure, where the husband “led” the young woman whom her father had “given” him to his home.

How about the woman's point of view? For her, there was no verb denoting the fact of marrying that would be the counterpart of the expressions mentioned. In Latin, for example, as an active verb *maritare* signifies "to pair up, to conjoin." So, the lack of her own verb indicates that the woman does not marry; she is married. She does not perform an act; her social status changes. However, that is precisely what the terms denote – the married woman's state. Here, it is exclusively a matter of *nouns* appearing on opposite branches of the Indo-European language tree, in Indo-Iranian and in Latin, that are used in the locution solemnly stating that the woman is taking on the "social status of wife." In Vedic, for example, *janitvana*, the term we would translate by "marriage," only applies to the woman and signifies a girl's accession to the state of legal wife. One might see in this a feature of "high Antiquity" linked with the structure of the great Indo-European family, for we find it in Roman society. The Latin term *matrimonium* is very significant in this regard. Taken literally, *matrimonium* signifies "legal status of *mater*." It therefore defines the social status to which the girl is acceding, that of *mater* (*familias*). That is what "marriage" signifies for her, not an act, but a destination; she is given and led away "in view of *matrimonium*," *in matrimonium*, just like the similar Indo-Iranian terms of *janitvana* – designating the state to which the bride is promised. The modern forms of *matrimonium* – *matrimonio* in the romance languages Spanish and Italian – have acquired the general meaning of "marriage." And this derivative *matrimonial* functions today in French as the adjective corresponding to *marriage*, so that, Benveniste observes, one might easily take *matrimonial* for the Latin derivative of *mariage*. However, *mariage*, the normal derivative of *marier* (Latin, *maritare*) has nothing in common with *matrimonium*. But the fact that the two have become associated with one another to the point of seeming related shows how far removed we are from ancient values. So it is that the noun forms that have led to the notion of "marriage" all first referred to the social status of the woman who became a wife. It was necessary for this specific feature to be expunged for the abstract concept of "marriage" to acquire substance and finally be able to designate the legal union of a man and a woman.

French definitions of "couple"

Now, what do we learn about the word *couple* from Emile Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française*?³

It is a matter of a *bond* attaching together two or several *similar things* (a cord used to bind two hunting dogs together, for example).

It is said, by extension, of *two things* of the *same kind*, *taken together*: a couple of eggs, of napkins.

A husband and wife, a male lover and a female lover, or two people living together out of friendship or mutual interest.

Term of mechanics: name given to two equal, parallel forces acting in opposite directions, one of which is applied to one end of a lever, the other to the other.

When “couple” is used with the masculine article in French, it refers to *two people united together by love or by marriage*; the same is said of two animals united to copulate.

When used with the feminine article in French, “couple” refers to any two things of the same kind that do not necessarily go together at all, and are only united accidentally, while “pair” designates two things that go together because they have to be used that way, like socks, shoes. “Couple” in the feminine only denotes the number and pair, and adds to this the idea of a necessary association for a particular end.

Thus, through these multiple meanings and notions of *couple*, in the masculine and in the feminine – those of a bond attaching similar things, of equal and opposite forces, of two things of the same kind, of pair, of persons living together, united out of love or by marriage – Littré already affords us a glimpse of all the heterogeneity of this reality that we are going to explore.

General anthropological facts

Images of marriage, of married couples and of celibacy in traditional societies

In *Masculin/Feminin* (1996),⁴ Françoise Héritier reminds us that kinship is the general matrix of social relationships, that society only exists divided into groups based on kinship and that it overcomes this original division through cooperation of which marriage, the primary institution, is one of the modalities opening into solidarity among these groups. She explains that a group that only counts on its own internal forces to reproduce biologically, that practices incest and only incest, would ultimately disappear, be it only through the rarefaction of its members.⁵ This is why the law of exogamy, the foundation of any society, must be understood, according to her, as a law of exchange of women among groups, an exchange of life, because women give birth to children and give their power of fecundity to people other than their close relations.

Regarding the matter of procreative union, Héritier points out that one finds in all human societies, without exception – including those where no stable, permanent conjugal bond exists – a legitimate form that we conventionally call “marriage.” It corresponds to extremely variable criteria. And it is this legitimate union that primarily constitutes the legitimacy of the children and *ipso facto* establishes their affiliation to a group.

But marriage is “serious business” involving adults, hence, the importance in this domain, as well, of rules of marriage enabling people to make choices that mitigate as much as possible the hazards and risks of ill-starred meetings. For, as Héritier explains, the punishment for mingling “incompatible blood” not accepted by the ancestors will be the sterility of the union or the early death of the children.⁶

In the different human societies, marriage is also a state of economic cooperation, in which the two sexes use technical skills that their culture recognizes as theirs, dictated by social conventions. Thus, the sexual distribution of tasks is the point making the union of the man and the woman indispensable for the well-being of both and for the survival of society.

Nevertheless, besides this legitimate union several types of matrimonial union having a different status may be recognized, among them cohabitation.

In addition, most human societies are protected from primary celibacy – antisocial act *par excellence* and, at the same time, the very negation of the individual, who is only supposed to attain complete self-fulfillment in and through marriage. So-called primitive societies do not tolerate it, for either sex, in its Western form of a free individual choice constituting a life commitment. Moreover, there exists a difference of perception of celibacy as practiced by men and by women: men harm themselves, while women are dangerous for the collectivity. Generally conceived of as going against nature, as a crime against the ancestors, especially, primary celibacy may, however, be admitted or recommended in certain societies for economic reasons, for example, something observed in feudal society.

A historical look at marriage and the couple in the Western world

Let us engage in an overview of marriage in the Western world from its ancient origins up until our time with two historians, Jean-Claude Bologne (2005)⁷ and André Burguière (1986).⁸

The legacy of the Romans and the Germanic peoples

Among both the Romans and the Germanic peoples, marriage first and foremost emerged from family laws and they knew two types of unions: on the one hand, an official marriage, decided upon by the family, on the other hand, a less stable union, *concubinatus* among the Romans, *Friedelehe*, “lover marriage” among the Germanic peoples. It is to be noted that cohabitation also existed throughout the ancient Orient. Against that, the Church would attempt to put forward its conception of a single marriage.

The Christian conception of marriage

It was not until the end of the twelfth century that the canonic law for marriage would be drawn up, which was in fact a sacrament substantially constituted by the mutual consent of the spouses, whose ministers were the spouses themselves. The permission of the parents, even in the case of minor children, was not actually indispensable, no more than was the presence of witnesses or the intervention of a priest. Moreover, canon law specified numerous impediments to marriage. Finally, the sacrament of marriage was indissoluble. Only death could break the conjugal bond

and thus free the surviving spouse to marry again. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, this conception of marriage was vigorously contested by the Protestant reformers, Luther and Calvin, whose positions would be condemned by the Council of Trent as early as 1547. They in fact considered marriage to be a divine institution, but not a sacrament. It was a contract based on mutual consent involving so great a commitment of spiritual and material interests as to need to be carefully thought over. In the case of minor children, this presupposes the obligatory consent of the parents expressing the authority of God without, nevertheless, imposing too many constraints upon them. Finally, Protestants theoretically accepted divorce, in the full sense of the term, but only in the case of proven adultery, or prolonged abandonment of the conjugal home. It was only in 1563 that the Council of Trent confronted the issue of matrimonial right and that very year adopted a body of texts including, notably, twelve very short canons reaffirming the sacramental, monogamous and indissoluble character of marriage, the primacy accorded to procreation, as well as the Church's exclusive competence in the matter of matrimonial causes. Moreover, a disciplinary decree targeted, in particular, clandestine marriages, that is those celebrated henceforth in the absence of the parish priest or of some other priest authorized by the parish priest. Finally, priestly celibacy was imposed and the state of virginity remained superior to that of marriage.

The Middle Ages, in feudal society

Feudal marriages were always a family affair, essentially concerning the fathers and secondarily the husband and wife. In fact, in the feudal system, starting in the Middle Ages, the court nobility particularly displayed overall suspicion in the face of love, which they tried to exclude from marriage in order to confine it within what was called "courtly love." The goal of marriage was to ensure the transmission of the fiefdom, without dividing up the land, to preserve the continuance of a mode of production. The nobility found it hard to comply with ecclesiastic legislation, engendering continual pressures and tensions between the two in the course of history. As a consequence, one often finds solemn marriage, alone in ensuring heirs, reserved for the oldest son, and therefore limited to one child per family. The younger children, if they did not make religious vows, were reduced to less noble or less durable forms of unions.

The Renaissance

This era was characterized by a general climate of sexual permissiveness, a state of mind favorable to the conjugal bond and an encouragement to individual determination. Although the marriage candidates were not alone in deciding and although negotiating such a marriage continued mainly to bring together two family groups having to work out between themselves a "transfer of woman and of goods," these young people did nevertheless enjoy a certain degree of autonomy of choice. In addition, we observe the first beginnings of a "paradoxical" privatization and