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Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg:
Modern Romance: An Investigation

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This review is as much about a new book by Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg as it is about the overall phenomenon of scientific production for wider public. It is a timely topic because this "public sociology" text exists within an increasingly professionalized academic environment, where the notion of "publish or perish" is felt by everyone. In this environment, the questions around who are we publishing for and for what ends become even more significant. Even though there might be some exceptions to the rule, the problem of science, in our case sociology, entering the public domain is relevant, as it should be. So how can sociology be more reflexive of its public role? Perhaps by changing the conventional forms of scientific publications.

The book *Modern Romance: An Investigation* (2015), which I discuss in the following paragraphs, can be considered an example of sociological knowledge presented in a publicly accessible form (perhaps for some, too accessible). Of course, we may argue right from the beginning that this accessibility is the result of a very fortunate combination of an attractive topic, an author known from show-business, and no higher aims for deep theoretic inquiry. In short: the book is designed to "sell well". Not underestimating this critique of marketed infotainment, the book in fact does sell well, with reviews published in respectable worldwide media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *National Public Radio*.

Modern Romance is a research book written by the American actor and stand-up comedian Aziz Ansari, with the scientific support of Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist based at New York University, who has worked with the themes of romance and singles before (e.g. Klinenberg 2012). The authors aim to investigate various aspects of romantic life in the era of digital technology, which has allowed dating possibilities that were "technically" not available before, such as dating websites and smartphone applications. Besides speaking about the intermediators of romantic relationships, Ansari and Klinenberg also comment on the growing individualism and social anxiety experienced by people "on the dating market" today. These trends certainly have appeared in connection with, even if they are not caused directly by, communications technology. Such anxiety is best illustrated by a model situation in which a person spends considerable time composing a text message to invite someone on a date, followed by an obsessive checking of the phone waiting for a reply. Even the reply to such an invite tends to follow certain arbitrary rules: the use of specific words and a delay in sending the message – all to make an impression that the sender is not "too eager".

While the topic of romantic relationships is an evergreen in the sociology of the family, the methodological approach of Ansari and Klinenberg may be regarded as quite unorthodox. For example, some of the research material is gathered at comedy clubs during Ansari's stand-up routines, or by setting up a discussion thread on the digital platform *Reddit*. In addition, the authors conduct focus groups and one-on-one interviews in different U.S. cities, chosen mainly according to their size and respective lifestyles. To provide cultural confrontation, parts of the research are done in Buenos Aires, Tokyo, Paris and Doha.

The original research material gathered by Ansari and Klinenberg serves more of an illustrative function, providing often humorous anecdotes from the romantic lives of those interviewed. The scientific framework of this "investigation" is set more rigorously by numerous academic studies from the fields of sociology, psychology and behavioural sciences. Moreover, some of the referenced studies are also explained and commented upon on by their authors, to whom Ansari and Klinenberg speak in person. Such use of citations and references is definitely a refreshing experience for readers buried within the traditional referencing style of "name and year in parentheses".

While the authors work with academic references, their book is not driven by any notable theory. However, the text entertains certain paradigms of thought, which should be seriously reflected on. Even though the main focus of their research centres on modern communications technology, Ansari and Klinenberg are not pure technological determinists. They do not claim that modern romance has changed because of technology; nevertheless, technology does play an important role in modern romance. Therefore, even if not explicitly intended, the book gives an interesting demonstration of how theoretical frameworks, such as the Latourian approach to the interaction between social structures, individuals and inanimate objects, might make sense to a lay audience.

To take the reading of theory between the lines further, *Modern Romance* comments on a paradox similar to that of modern capitalism proposed by Daniel Bell (1976). The somewhat egoistic focus on individual success and wellbeing has significantly transformed the image of a functioning romantic relationship. The pragmatic approach to marriage, which the authors discuss with senior participants, is illustrated by the proximity of the places where the romantic partners came from, as well as by the conditions they had to fulfil to be eligible for marriage (*good enough* job, *good enough* family background). Those looking for a romance today have much higher criteria for their prospective partners. Enforcing the hedonistic idea that "a special someone is out there for everyone", the modern romantic discourse encourages the search for this ideal romantic partner. Modern communications technology, together with internet-based dating platforms, gives hope that this special someone is just "a few clicks away". Paradoxically, the combination of high demands and seemingly endless possibilities of choice result in people staying single, yet still full of hope.

So who is actually involved in this kind of romantic discourse? The authors acknowledge right from the start that their book focuses primarily on the heterosexual relationships of middle-class, college educated American respondents. Such demographic bias might as well overlap with the scope of their potential reader audience. Despite these limitations,

the research scope is still very wide and therefore tends to overlook important categories such as the issue of race, which is still a dominant aspect of daily American experience.

When taking into consideration the various forms of communications technology used in everyday life, Ansari and Klinenberg try to both capture the evolution of the particular communication devices, as well the romantic agency tied to them. "As our technology becomes more prevalent in our lives, romantic behavior that seems strange or inappropriate to one generation can become the norm for people in the next one" (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015: 36). In an entertaining way, the reader is introduced to the evolution of dating platforms: from newspaper ads to smartphone applications. This insight may also provide an interesting reference to comparative studies looking at the use of dating technology in other cultural and geographical contexts. The globalised market for communications technology often serves as an example of the concept of glocalization, when certain products or services have different uses in different geo-cultural settings. A small illustration of this notion is provided in the brief case studies of dating markets in Paris, Doha, Buenos Aires and Tokyo.

When addressing the form and style of writing, *Modern Romance* is definitely an insightful and witty attempt to make scientific findings accessible for readers of any background. However, when compared to the traditional style of academic writing it may seem lightweight or even trivial. While I wouldn't want to undermine the responsible role of scientific production, the use of humour in research methodology, particularly in the reporting of findings, may have overlooked benefits. Cate Watson (2014: 408), in her study of humour in academic writing, goes so far as to claim that by "ignoring the humorous as an analytical attitude, or the comic as a mode of representation", we might end up rejecting a potentially insightful methodological approach. An eye for irony might as well be considered requisite for a good sociological imagination. Not only humour, but also the use of illustrative anecdotes to explain complex scientific findings is quite a refreshing approach. Such an anecdotal approach is, however, not unknown in the social sciences – to give a few famous examples, it has been successfully used by Thorstein Veblen, Erving Goffman, Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann and Bruno Latour. In the Czech academic context, we have several examples of such writing in the works of Ivo Možný, whose field of scientific interest significantly overlaps with that of *Modern Romance*.

To further develop the idea of providing a more accessible form of scientific production that is relevant to a wider public, I would also highlight the work of Eric Klinenberg, the second author of *Modern Romance*, who chairs the *Institute for Public Knowledge* at New York University. The Institute has worked on several projects of public concern (from climate change to urban lifestyles) by bringing together academics, social workers and organizational leaders around the selected topics. Such occasional collaboration with others from outside the self-sustaining academic bubble, whether it be stand-up comedians, journalists or organizational representatives, might benefit not only the wider readership, but also the universe of scientific publishing, which many see in crisis.

References

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