

EUROPE IN TRANSITION: THE NYU EUROPEAN STUDIES SERIES



POLITICS IN PRIVATE

Love and Conviction in the French Political Consciousness

Anne Muxel,
Translated by Chantal Barry



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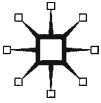
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*For all those who have enriched my life
with their love and convictions*

For Pascal

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Series Editor's Foreword

This remarkable book is altogether different from every other volume in this series. Based on important depth interviews, it focuses on politics as a deep and continuing part of our lives. It gives us an important and new understanding of the importance of politics by analyzing the role played by politics in an individual's private, intimate life with others. Like love, politics is characterized by commitment, betrayal, deep passions, and bitter break ups. Although it is based on interviews in France, the analysis is universal. In which ways, Anne Muxel asks, do political differences, ideological commitments, and different patterns of voting behavior intrude on intimate relationships? What is the role of politics and an individual's personal identity?

By focusing on the political world as a set of independent variables she explores new questions, as well older questions from a different point of view. In this study, Anne Muxel explores how politics and transmission of political values takes place within families, between spouses and partners, parents and children. She examines these questions not so much to understand the impact of this transmission on voting and elections (although she does not ignore this question), but to understand the impact of the world of politics on this process.

This book is not about politics at a distance, but very much about politics lived in daily life. It is very much in the tradition of Robert Lane's two classic volumes about American political life, and with similar methodology. Just as Lane's works on the United States have become classics read by successive generations of students and scholars, Muxel's study of French political life also promises to be a classic in the same way.

MARTIN A. SCHAIN
New York University

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Acknowledgments

I would first of all like to thank all those who accepted to be interviewed by me and who so generously agreed to reveal a part of their own private and intimate lives to me. Without them this book would not have existed.

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Finally, to Chantal Barry who translated the manuscript into English with great patience and admirable virtuosity. I want to say how grateful I am to her and how much I appreciated her remarks, suggestions, and passionate involvement in the text.

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A Word from the Translator

Translating Anne Muxel's book has been a fascinating journey for me largely because it transported me back to my early years in France and my attempts at that time to understand the many ideas about life, love, and politics swirling constantly around me in the barrage of passion that seemed to be part of daily life for the French. Her book offers as many, if not more insights, into the way French people think about love and politics as it does into those subjects themselves. It can be read therefore as a means to grasp French thinking about these subjects as much as it can as a theory about the role politics plays in private life.

Time and time again as I translated I saw myself back in the first years I spent in France after I arrived there as a young teacher in 1985. At that time, I was overwhelmed by the passion with which anything to do with politics or political ideas was discussed. You could be cast out of the company as the vilest of creatures if you dared or were foolish enough to express sympathy for a political camp not in favor among those present. Either that or you were seen to be delightfully naïve and taken by the hand so that things could be explained to you because obviously you had not yet understood. There was never any sense of arrogance in these scenes where the passions were engaged for real and not for show. It was nonetheless true that during my first years in France, I believed it was all as important as it seemed to be, such was the depth of conviction and fire with which friends and colleagues argued their point.

Many of the positions held and attitudes toward those who did not share these positions were not just literally foreign to me but also quite simply unthinkable. I am not referring here to the political beliefs themselves but rather to the vehemence with which these positions were held and the subsequent impact of them on personal and private relationships. I could not, for example, in my wildest dreams imagine never speaking to my parents again because they voted for a different political

party than I did. And I am not talking about the extremes here but about center parties on the left or right. In fact, I almost expected my parents to have different politics from me if only because they were from a different generation and therefore society than the one I had grown up in.

One expression I found very difficult to understand then and to translate now was *amour fusionnel* and it might be worth explaining this briefly for the non-French speaking reader as it is an essential figure in the book. The term refers to a type of love where two people almost literally become one. They tend to use “we” instead of “I” at all times and never, ever disagree with each other on anything. The children of such couples often feel excluded as there is little room for outsiders, no matter who they are, between the *couple fusionnel*. The point here is that although this type of love is a universal phenomenon, recognizing it as an actual type to aspire to or to reject is a particularly French notion. I have translated the *Figure* “Idéal de Fusion” as “The Ideal of Osmosis,” the closest I could come to the notion but not an easily recognizable type of love in the English language that simply doesn’t have the words to name it.

Although this depth of passion and feeling for the subject has a very French feel to it, the figures themselves also have a universal quality to them that readers from any cultural background will undoubtedly recognize and identify with.

Thus, there are several interviewees in the book who are easily recognizable on a universal level but whose strength of passion at the same time seems decidedly French. Again as a translator, it seems to me that this is where the interest of the book lies: its ability to present both the universal and the particular at one and the same time.

In some examples such as the case of Thierry, who cannot forgive his brother for believing that homosexuality might be genetic and for voting Sarkozy or Noémie, who would prefer that her sister didn’t vote at all than that she votes to the center-right, the individuals seem sympathetic and understandable in French but oddly less so in English where they seem at times harsh and intolerant.

And then there is Charles, the university professor who is ashamed of his son for not being convincing in his arguments. “His malaise is considerable at the idea that he might consider his son to be, if not an idiot, then at the very least incapable of engaging in clear and reasonable argument.” Again this seems terribly harsh in English and one can only imagine Charles as the kind of father one would rather not have. In French, however, the strength of his feeling and his fear of loving

his son less make him far more sympathetic. This somewhat echoes the relationship Patrice has with his mother both of whom are on opposite sides of the center. He feels less loved by her for that reason.

There are many more examples such as Eléonore who is ashamed of her parents for voting Bayrou or Elisabeth who cannot bear to talk about politics in public with her husband because he doesn't put his arguments forward coherently enough for her.

Another particularly French position on a universal concept is the cleavage between left and right (again, the center and not the extremes). Clearly, there is nothing new in the notion itself of left and right but in France it has always had a particularly strong importance and still does so today. To say of someone *il/elle est de gauche* or *il/elle est de droite* usually translates an insult rather than a statement of fact.

All of this is to say that because of the intensity and passion of positions held in France, the interviewees may sometimes sound harsh and unforgiving and much more so than they do in French. This is an eternal difficulty for translation: it is one thing to translate a language and quite another to translate a culture whose intricacies, values, and behaviors a mere language is at a loss to render.

CHANTAL BARRY
September 2013

INTRODUCTION

Politics through the Prism of Intimacy

The domain of politics is generally considered to belong to the world of public affairs. The links entertained by individuals with politics are reflected in the voting choices they make and in their political involvement, both of which are usually considered to be of interest only for their effects at a collective level. Commentators and observers focus on the opinions of citizens as members of a collective society rather than as private individuals, looking at their behavior and way of expressing themselves during elections, as activists, members of a political party, union members, demonstrators, strikers, members of a television audience, newspaper leaders, or participants in opinion polls which are examined, abundantly commented on, and dissected.

Much is known about the different ways of engaging in politics, about interaction between those who govern and those who are governed, and about election results. Electoral volatility, the rise in abstention, the increase in protest, the crisis in political engagement, the weakening of social and partisan allegiances, the development of participative democracy, and the generalization of negative politicization—together these phenomena describe Western democracies today and are the focus of much study.

However, little information exists on the role played by politics in the individual's affective and private life.¹ Little is known about the way in which politics intervenes in interpersonal relationships and permeates personal and everyday conversations. Many questions arise: What exactly is the role of politics in private life? What role does politics play in personal exchanges and interests, in a relationship based

on romantic love, within the family or in a friendship? Are the power struggles that politics entails in the private sphere the same as those in the public sphere? Is political agreement essential within a relationship based on feelings or is there room for disagreement? Is it possible to fall in love with someone with radically different political views from oneself? Can a friendship be maintained when a strong difference in political convictions occurs? How far can acceptance of difference go? In what way do differences of opinion, ideological opposition, or different types of voting behavior trouble personal relationships based on feeling? Can politics strengthen love? Can it, on the contrary, put an end to love?

Social science approaches to politics clearly presume the existence of the affective dimension in the relationship individuals entertain with politics. These approaches have established the central role played by the process of familial socialization in the shaping of ideological orientations and political behavior. However, they have not focused much on the way in which politics is diffracted and refracted in the individual's private life. They are little used to understand the complexity of the interface between the public and private sphere where political identities take shape and acquire meaning, where choices, values, and convictions are determined and revisited. These are like underground tunnels and are infinitely more difficult to map. And yet, this is where the essence and the contours of the politicization of the individual are incarnated and negotiated.

This book will explore the role played by politics at the heart of the individual's personal identity. This includes the individual's relationship to politics in itself and the role politics might play between one person and another or others. The focus will be on looking at the way in which politics is refracted in the intimate circle and in relationships based on feeling. In other words, *Politics in Private*.

The choice of the word "explore" is deliberate. Very little work has been done on this subject to date, which allows me a certain degree of freedom in dealing with it now. In that sense, the inquiry undertaken in this book is certainly original but it is definitely not without risk. Must one have the same political convictions as somebody else in order to love them? There is little theoretical or scientific material available to answer this question. Given that the body of knowledge around it is so small, attempting to answer it is a risky business indeed. Neither literature nor the social sciences, nor political science, nor psychoanalysis has provided precise and detailed support material

on this subject to date. Another risk factor is the personal dimension it necessarily calls for. This became more and more apparent as my research on the building of political identity and modes of socialization progressed throughout my career. From an academic point of view, there is no doubt that engaging the personal dimension is not a conventional approach. Neither is the approach itself immediately obvious for everyone even if most people have some sort of immediate and private understanding of the issue. I asked the questions of myself, of others in my private circle, and also of people who were strangers to me or who remained anonymous. This book contains the answers given to me although it cannot transmit the sounds, intonation, laughter, tears, silences, or enthusiasm of the respondents reflecting the ever-present emotional aspect of the subject.

Any attempt to understand the impact politics has on feelings and emotions in the private life is therefore risky both from the point of view of knowledge and method. What follows in this book could be described as a first decoding of the subject. It will provide a political phenomenology viewed through the mirror of the private and personal but interpreted within the framework of otherness. It will focus on a triple dimension: politics, love, and the question of agreement (or disagreement) or in other words, politics in private. Drawing on the complex interaction between these three dimensions, it will attempt to reconstitute the fragments of a politico-sentimental discourse, thereby revealing the most characteristic figures of this discourse. Following the example of Roland Barthes when he defended the heuristic virtue of the “figure,” the reader will be able to exclaim: “That’s so true! I recognise that scene of language.”² Each figure identified reproduces incidents or snippets of events where love and lack of love are mixed together. Such incidents will be familiar to any reader, which means that any individual will recognize themselves in there, identify something from their own experience or a familiar scene, or indeed a part of their own past. Taken as a whole, the various figures of political agreement and disagreement show that nothing can be formulated definitively. What they do reflect is a high level of complexity and a labyrinth of senses, affects, and emotions.

The book has been designed as an inventory of political scenes taking place in the privacy of personal relationships. Every different type of love has been included: conjugal love, filial love, parental love, fraternal love, and friendship. All of these different types of relationships will be explored. From “Osmosis as an Ideal” to the “Break up,” from

a “Categorical Imperative” to “Democratic Intimacy,” between “Undue Influence” and “Malaise,” “Silence” and “Taboo,” or “Eros” and the “Chili Pepper,” the figures of political agreement and disagreement reflect the experience of each one of us. In that sense, although the book uses the French political scene to illustrate how people think and experience the place and role of politics in their private lives, it also makes universal arguments about how love and political convictions are inter-related. It can therefore be read from two different perspectives. From one perspective, it offers an in-depth vision of how the French perceive politics and is revealing of the attitudes of French people today toward the political landscape that surrounds them. From a second perspective, it provides a universal framework for the interpretation of the emotional and affective aspects of politics.

Finally, this book is above all the result of a survey. A great deal of it is the fruit of the in-depth interviews I carried out with around 50 people (men and women) who were selected in function of their generational, social, and political diversity.³ Their collected narratives show the diversity of their political references and their personal and social circumstances. The effects of social structure and sociological predispositions inherent to each of them can also be perceived. However, I opted for a different approach using other criteria to interpret them and drawing on other types of cleavage. I did this by dismantling the mechanisms used for agreement and disagreement together with other mechanisms taken from the realm of the emotions. Politics within the intimate circle corresponds to logics which are not purely social. I carried out the research with this idea in mind.

A great deal of talking was done about politics in general and about the respondents’ individual lives before I could get to the heart of my subject and begin to gather answers to the questions my work was centrally concerned with. What happens to the love one person has for another when they have opposing political opinions? How do love and convictions function together—? How does an individual square the love they feel for another when each has differing political convictions?

Parts of this subject cannot be expressed. What is perceived in the heart is not always comprehensible to reason. It is not an easy task to describe the bonds created by love with words. The affective implications of politics is an emotive subject but one which does not easily surface as such in the conscious mind. Because of their ability to anger and hurt others and oneself, feelings and politics are two areas that many people feel wary of. And yet, this was the subject I wanted to talk about. And to listen to others talk about.

During the course of the interviews, respondents initially tended to talk in a rational and logical way before getting to a more intimate political discourse, which is what I was looking for. It was not easy to speak about agreement or to recognize that disagreement is present in a given relationship. Above all, it was not easy to talk about the implications these elements had for their feelings toward the other person and for their own self-esteem.

And yet, little by little the unsayable was said thanks to all those who willingly accepted to throw themselves into this unprecedented exploration with me.

PART I

Love and Politics

Mutual recognition is one of the first signs of love and perhaps even a necessary condition for it to be born. This is true for all kinds of bonds: filial, fraternal, romantic, and platonic. In all of these different types of bonds that shape personal and affective identity, there must be mutual recognition for an attachment—short or long term—to form and develop. Without it, even in the restrictive framework of familial relationships, love will not blossom.

This recognition does not always follow the same principles depending on the individuals involved. For some, it supposes similarity rather than difference. For others, it is nourished by otherness leaving room for difference, albeit accompanied by a risk of discordance or disagreement. The enigma of possible affinities remains and the attraction of individuals forming a small circle of intimates cannot be explained categorically or definitively. The paths toward this mutual recognition are complex and often fragile as the bonds can be weakened or indeed broken. Then there is the question of what one really recognizes in the other. This might be a part of oneself that is similar to the other (birds of a feather flock together). It might be another, who is very different to the self (opposites attract). And finally, what does this other recognize in the one who offers love? The chemistry is always mysterious, and even more so when it comes to physical, affective, and emotional bonds, together with all the range of demands made on the other once this mutual recognition has taken place.

Within the troubled waters of personal relationships where, over a lifetime, the bonds of love are created and broken many times over, what space should be given to political convictions, choices, and values? There may be a temptation, if not to minimize this space then to relativize it. And it might be supposed that few will see it as essential.