

Separations: The Female Perspective

Cécile VAN DE VELDE

In his new work, François de Singly continues to explore the transformations of marital bonds. This time, he approaches them from another angle—that of the “process of uncoupling” experienced by women who have recently separated from their partner. More than just a sociological study of the gender relations at play in a separation, this investigation explores the engagement and disengagement of the self within the ties of marriage.

Reviewed: François de Singly, *Séparée. Vivre l'expérience de la rupture* [Separated. Living Through a Break-Up], Paris, Armand Colin, 2011, 240 p. 17.80 euros.

But why do they leave? Two decades after *Fortune et infortune de la femme mariée*,¹ François de Singly returns to his first love and continues his exploration of female destiny within marriage. This time around, he approaches it from the opposite perspective: separation. He carries out his investigation by interviewing just under 100 women of all ages and social backgrounds, but who have one thing in common—all have been separated for between exactly six months and a year. In reference to the work of Diane Vaughan on “uncoupling,”² François de Singly focuses on the process of uncoupling that precedes and prolongs an actual separation. Uncoupling here is understood in its broadest sense, with unmarried couples also included, but from an exclusively female perspective. The sample was initially open to men, but the analysis deliberately focuses on women’s accounts only. As is suggested by the bright pink cover and the title “Separated. Living Through a Break-Up”, this book is an in-depth exploration of the female rhetoric of disunion.

Separation as a Return to the Self

François de Singly bases his choice of the female perspective on a two-fold observation: the number of divorces has continued to rise over recent decades, and women are the main instigators. He quickly establishes a link between the increasing feminization of divorce—and, by assumption, that of separation—and the process of individualization and one of its expressions: female emancipation. In a society of individuals, he maintains, the function of the couple has changed, becoming not only a support in terms of security but also for self-recognition: the individualization of women has resulted in a greater demand to

¹ F. de Singly, *Fortune et infortune de la femme mariée*, Paris, PUF, 1987. [A Married Woman’s Fortune and Misfortune].

² D. Vaughan, *Uncoupling. Turning Points in Intimate Relationships*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986.

“validate one’s identity.” The hazards of life as a couple should increasingly be interpreted as a “thread of the self” that unfolds according to the logic of personal development. The proof, writes François de Singly, lies in the fact that all these tales of separation have one thing in common: an image of the prior disappearance of the self runs through them all, and no matter what the troubles have been, they remain imbued with a rhetoric of self-rediscovery.

This kind of “ode to liberation” nevertheless has a markedly different resonance among the various women: at the heart of the book, the typology that is presented brings a number of different separation scenarios into play. They document the multiple reasons behind break-ups, the experience of “uncoupling” and the methods used to rebuild the self. In this context, social and generational divides disappear, in favour of a differentiation pattern that is structured primarily according to the very meanings of separation, which are themselves linked to the previous marital bond. “We separate as we have lived:” François de Singly believes that what makes most sense in the female experience of separation is the way in which people invest in their relationship. Using prior research carried out on people between the ages of 30 and 50 who hold the *baccalauréat* qualification, he establishes three main types of partnerships, lying on a scale that shifts from a predominance of “we,” to a cohabitation of “we” and “I,” to a predominance of “I.” From this interpretation, three models of female separation emerge, bringing into play a connection with the couple, with time, and with the self.

Female Reasons for Disengagement

“Separating to survive.” This is the first type of separation experience, and it characterizes women in whose relationship the conjugal “we”—on which they had leaned heavily—reaches a deadlock. In these cases, separation comes as a much-needed reminder of the self, which has been symbolically killed off within a “we” that has been betrayed and therefore rejected. A significant event, such as the discovery that one’s partner has been unfaithful, can signal the sudden, radical withdrawal of life as a couple and trigger the long process of learning how to construct a self outside the couple. François de Singly emphasizes that these processes of “uncoupling” are the most difficult, because these women are often older and have invested in the relationship and their family; furthermore, they cannot depend on a support network and do not envisage entering into another relationship in the near future. François de Singly interprets this as the early stage of female emancipation, which results from the woman’s refusal to make an investment in the relationship when it is not reciprocated.

“Separating in order to grow:” this second type of separation characterizes women whose autonomy is more established within the conjugal “we” and who are prepared to separate when their relationship is perceived to be slowing or hindering their personal development. The rhetoric of routine or imprisonment becomes dominant here, and the separation finds meaning in a desire to be free from a dependency that prevents the woman from becoming herself. It is gradual and not systematically justified by “faults” found in her partner. This model applies mostly to young women, and is close to the “pure relationship” described by Anthony Giddens, in which the development of the couple—not dictated by the need to stay together—is regularly reassessed in the light of the woman’s personal development; however, this does not, François de Singly adds, prevent her from feeling lonely or from missing her partner after the separation. In this second type of uncoupling, he

identifies a second stage in women's emancipation: a relationship should be a shared investment as well as be compatible with personal development.

“Separating in order to rediscover oneself:” this third type of separation concerns women who are seeking a balance between a real investment in the couple's relationship and individual independence. Here, the separation finds meaning in a reclaiming of the self when faced with a non-existent “we” or a feeling of frustration as regards a life together that is not considered to be sufficiently shared. The dominant rhetoric here is that of the (temporary) “forgetting” of the self within a relationship that is found to be asymmetrical; the separation is considered necessary for establishing a new “we/I” balance. For these relatively young women, who have a high level of interpersonal and professional resources, the process of uncoupling does not result in any significant rebuilding of the identity, and continues with a potentially rapid reinvestment in a new conjugal “we.” François de Singly sees this as the emergence of a new female version of autonomy, unified around an entirely new combination of two desires—to care for another person and to develop one's individual independence—whereas male autonomy finds expression in the compartmentalization of their worlds.

A Move Towards a “Commodification” of Marital Bonds?

Taking these multiple forms of separation as his point of departure, François de Singly predicts a change in the rules governing conjugal love, instigated mainly by women. The increase in their “concern for the self” goes hand in hand with a kind of dissolution of the female *agape*, understood as unconditional love and marked by unrequited giving, in favour of *philia*—love that is marked by the demand for reciprocity. The process of women's individualization has caused parental and conjugal love to separate; it first found expression in a demand for female *eros* throughout the 20th century, and then in a growing expectation of reciprocity and individual recognition. Couples' relationships have been taken over by new challenges, particularly equality and conditionality. Separations can now be fuelled by the refusal of a routine existence—in the name of personal development—or by an insufficiently shared world.

Mutual demand for *agape* for men who were previously unaccustomed to it, and restriction of *agape* and a decline in female investment: conjugal love is becoming “a rational, conditional and contractual love.” In a tone that we do not often see from him, François de Singly highlights the risks of the “rationalization of intimate relationships,” making a reference to the work of Eva Illouz, and indeed the “commodification” of the conjugal bond. Faced with what he sees as the introduction of rational calculation and instrumental reason into couples' relationships, he finally argues in favour of a love that can preserve both *agape* and *philia*.

From the Couple to the Individual

This book should be read as an essay with a highly analytical and prospective dimension. It is full of insightful and often compelling ideas on the consequences of female emancipation for the evolution of the conjugal bond; however, these socio-historical interpretations go beyond the mere mobilization of data, instead deploying a sociological construction of the contemporary transformations of the couple. François de Singly adopts a personal style and punctuates it with selected portraits, striking shortcuts and subtle insights, as well as passages that suddenly lead from an individual account to more general assertions.

This personalized way of writing about sociology has its attractions, not least its interest, readability, originality, clarity, and accessibility to multiple readerships. However, when placed on an equal footing, these individual accounts taken from interviews, films and novels follow one another in an impressionistic way, and are at times more illustrative than demonstrative. Discussion of the subject of separation cannot be detached from the theory of the individual, which carries it, gives it coherence and provides hypotheses for the interpretations. It would have been interesting to discuss—in the light of the results that are put forward in this sociological context—the works that also deal with the subject of female separation, whether that be the sociology of divorce (particularly the chapter “Drames et tragedies” [“Dramas and Tragedies”] by Irène Théry,³ which focuses on related questions), gender, female celibacy or individual bifurcation.

The notion of separation is put to the test in this book, which intensifies this prism of interpretation in terms of “I” and “we” in its analysis of the contemporary conjugal bond, as well as its potential myopia. This analysis appears most fruitful in its transversal dynamics. The perspective it adopts documents couples through their limits and escape rhetoric, and convinces the reader of the salience of the experience of returning to the “self” in the accounts given of conjugal separation. These expressive portraits of women who are struggling with a bond they consider to be imbalanced, and convinced of the need to disengage, say a great deal about the precarious balance of contemporary relationships, to which the two-fold demand for reciprocity and personal development adds tension. The interpretation that is proposed emphasizes the dialectic of self-engagement within a “we” that claims to be making an equal investment, the individual tensions it causes, and the woman’s means of resolving it. The author shows great perception when analyzing the emergence of a type of separation that is not guided by clearly identified frustrations within the conjugal relationship but rather by a desire for personal development—“separating in order to grow.” This justification for separation, going beyond mere necessity or rejection, provides an insight into the dynamics that are at work in the individual’s link with conjugality.

It should be mentioned that, ultimately, his premise of the female perspective as a driving force for contemporary separations is not fully explored. Choosing to present only women’s accounts does not enable the relative role of women in the evolution of the couple and in separations to be gauged. Would women’s supposed expectations of conjugality stand up to a comparative analysis of the male experience of separation? Without the male perspective, gender dynamics disappear behind the female-only account, in favour of the development of the “me” and the process of rebuilding one’s identity following a separation. Indeed, the perspective that is chosen causes us to give greater value to the driving force behind the identity dynamics in a separation, without systematically giving form to the underlying substance of the social factors that regulate these types of uncoupling. No matter how justified and fruitful it might be, the vision of a liberated individual who is the protagonist of her own separation in the name of reconquering the “self,” whether protected or triumphant, leaves little room for possible elements that might complete our understanding of the phenomenon—such as the process of rationalization, the need for justification, differentiated social constraints, material aspects, and normative conflicts that can punctuate the experience of separation or non-separation. The universality of the rhetoric of “self-reconquest” could, for example, be brought about by the very process of uncoupling, to give meaning to a life transformation that eludes the individual who has just experienced the

³ I. Théry, *Le démariage*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1993 (chapter “Drames et tragédies”).

separation: in this case, this “liberation” of the “I” does not enable us to reach any conclusions on the transversal penetration of a strict rule of calculation and conditionality in force throughout a long-term relationship. A longitudinal perspective on the extended period of a relationship might allow us to glimpse the normative and identity conflicts at work, particularly between the rules of stability and mobility in the life course of the couple, and the social diversity of the rules of conjugal engagement that govern it. In other words, are we all really just goats like those in the French tale “La Chèvre de Monsieur Séguin,”⁴ as is suggested at the end, longing to escape, constantly judging and reassessing our relationships in the light of our own personal development? This opens up a new area for debate that urges us to supplement the question “Why leave?” with “Why stay?”

Ultimately, this investigation opens up a sociology of bifurcation and of the rhetoric of individual change, which is taken to the extreme because an intimate subject is being addressed: here, separation is what crystallizes the transformation of a self that had engaged and invested in the conjugal bond. This interpretation does not exhaust the subject of separation, but it complements and reinforces the coherence of the sociology of the couple as established by François de Singly, offering a vigorous, long-term reflection on the evolving links between the individual, equality and conjugality.

First published in laviedesidees.fr. Translated from French by **Susannah Dale** with the support of the **Florence Gould Foundation**. Published in booksandideas.net 29 October 2012.

©booksandideas.net

⁴ Translator’s note: In this tale, the goat longs for freedom and escapes to the mountain where it is devoured by the wolf.