On emotions

The correspondence between Algirdas Julius Greimas and Aleksandra Kasuba, 1988-1992

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The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman finds unstable families and relationships a threat to society at large. Anthony Giddens opens for negotiation and change to keep both parties satisfied. Dalia Leinarte finds Giddens more in keeping with the times and uses the correspondence between two Lithuanian intellectuals to illustrate her point.

Not long ago in his public lecture in Lithuania, Zygmunt Bauman defined consumption both as a desirable goal and a threat against the very existence of the modern world. For instance, devastating demands on energy cause global warming, imbalances in nature and even climate catastrophes.

However Bauman, like some other sociologists, talks about consumerism in interpersonal relationships, in areas that traditionally belong to ethics and morals. He stresses the commercialization of the interpersonal realm, where the exchange of all sorts of goods or gifts acts as a substitute for human bonds.

Bauman also talks about the corruption of romantic relationships, which often mirrors the consumerist paradigm. Much like in a grocery store, men and women are encouraged not to waste their time and to give up on relationships that “do not work” in order to seek out the next “product”.

As Bauman puts it ironically, if a “product” is unsuitable, it can be returned and another can be bought. Similarly, he argues, the exceptional focus on personal pleasure and satisfaction in interpersonal bonds do not help to secure their stability or longevity. If we treat our partner primarily as a source of satisfaction and happiness, but he or she is not capable, does not want to, or fails to fulfil these requests, we have many ways of breaking off such bonds. In other words, today we are cautious about investing in life-long relationships. As Bauman says: “Nobody promises life-long love to goods nor makes the vow ‘Till death do us part’. We all know that tomorrow, another product will be available and we will be able to throw away the old and buy the new.”
At this point Bauman sees a threat to society in general. Unstable families and partnerships frequently result in the abandonment of children, disputes over a couple’s property, and the other turmoil of a destroyed family. Bauman reminds us that some time ago “families were the unbreakable bricks of society’s body”, and advocates a return to neo-traditional “lifelong” marriages. He opposes the modern idea of testing one’s own feelings in experimental relationships, which itself implies temporality, and argues that conscious life-long self-determination and vows encourage partners to improve rather than abandon relationships.

Speaking of consumerism in interpersonal relationships, Bauman fields some critique towards British sociologist Anthony Giddens and his model of “pure relationships” where two persons stay in a relationship so long as both sides are satisfied. [1] Where Bauman treats such bonds as “shallow” and more or less irresponsible, Giddens understands them as a new form of intimacy. He claims that “pure relationships” require a great deal of responsibility, openness and trust, for instead of growing discontent, both partners share their inner experiences with each other. As a result, newly discovered shifts in feelings request either an adjustment or the abandonment of the relationship entirely.

Both sociologists believe alienation is the main problem of the modern world. Yet whereas Bauman links alienation with the commercialization of human bonds while Giddens connects it with growing aggression, both agree that salvation lies in the transformation of intimacy. They suggest two strategies of gender politics for the private sphere. At this point, Bauman sees gender balance in a “neo-traditional” commitment, while for Giddens the transformation of intimacy is primarily linked with personal autonomy, mutual respect, equality and the democratization of intimate relationships. If emotions became life politics and relationships were based on equality, he believes, there would be no room for aggression.

Both sociologists assume negotiation as a basis for interpersonal relationships. However, if for Bauman it is a means and guarantee for stability and longevity, Giddens understands negotiation as a precondition for comfortable relationships.

Both models are significant strategies in gender politics, though it seems Giddens better meets the expectations of contemporary society where women are neither ready nor willing to commit themselves to violent partnerships. He admits that “pure relationships” are closely attached to the environment of a developed democracy, and as such are not easy to implement in a case of its absence.

This is a good occasion to turn to the correspondence of Aleksandra Kasuba, a Lithuanian-American artist, and Algirdas Julien Greimas, a Lithuanian-born French semiotician. Their correspondence illustrates their relationship as being close or even identical to the one described by Giddens.

He defines “pure relationships” as intimate ties that are based on so-called passionate love (amour…) and romantic friendship. He does not restrict the term exceptionally for heterosexual couples but also applies it to homosexual relations.

At the time Aleksandra Kasuba and Algirdas Julien Greimas started their correspondence, they had been living a great distance apart from each other. Kasuba had settled down in
the US and Greimas lived in France. It seems that their first letters were neither followed by romantic accounts nor initiated by other passionate impulses. As Kasuba put it, in 1988 she sent a manuscript to Greimas and that is how their correspondence began. On the other hand, and this is evident from the letters, several decades earlier, in 1944, they felt for each other what can be judged as romantic passion. In a tiny introductory foreword to the volume in which the correspondence is published, Kasuba gives an account of the romantic friendship that took place and recalls: “In 1944 as the front was approaching, Greimas suggested we leave for France together. However, I was not ready for such a journey. At that time, I had already started a relationship with my future husband Vytautas Kasuba, the sculptor.” [2] Thus, even though it had been drawn out in time and space, Greimas’ and Kasuba’s acquaintance was built on a romantic impulse.

Their renewed communication points to one other aspect of “pure relationships”. According to Giddens, “pure relationships” as a form of transformed intimacy are the reverse of marriage. Similarly, both Greimas and Kasuba had enjoyed other relationships. Aleksandra was married to Kasuba, while Greimas lived with a young woman, Teresa. She was very important to Greimas and he wrote to Kasuba: “I do not remember if I told you anything about Teresa. Without any doubt, it is thanks to her that I survived during these years.”

However, in 1988 Greimas and Kasuba also started emotionally intimate relationships. Here we come across another aspect of “pure relationships”: a couple’s sexual relationships do not necessarily need to be monogamous. According to Giddens, sex norms are supposed to be negotiated between partners by mutual agreement. Similarly, Kasuba assures Greimas: “I am happy that you are not alone and Teresa is with you.” And likewise, Greimas: “I wanted to kiss you again for the way you accept Teresa, so naturally, without any doubts or wonderings.” Greimas himself described his relationships with women in accordance with Giddens: “Hania – official wife, – Teresa – You.” It is evident that “You”, i.e., Kasuba, and Teresa were equally important to Greimas.

According to Giddens, transformed intimacy can eliminate sexual activity completely if such forms of intimacy satisfy both partners. Negotiations towards this type of intimacy can also be found in the letters of the two Lithuanians.

In her letters Kasuba mentioned that she wanted to see Greimas, and in planning her trip to France she expressed great infatuation. She enthusiastically scheduled the journey so that the two could spend some time only in each other’s company, with no outsiders. Kasuba sent romantic suggestions and was eager to hear his proposal: “Presuming that we shall meet and if this would be most convenient for you, I could pay you a visit at your place first, and then go to Chartres. However, it would be a great delight if you would accept my invitation and be my guest at Chartres. I could book a hotel room for you for a couple of days. But what are your suggestions, and what would be most convenient for you?”

Yet, having received no confirmation from Greimas, nor an idea of his intentions regarding the trip planning, she felt embarrassed and a little perplexed. She gathered that she had probably seen their relationship a little differently than he, and became somewhat disappointed and disillusioned. After some time, Kasuba wrote back to
Greimas with slight irony: “As far as our possible meeting is concerned, everything stays as I wrote to you. I still want to see you and spend time with you for a couple of days. I confirm this. Otherwise, there is no single reason why I would go to France. I wouldn’t be surprised that the idea of spending those few days with me strikes you as comical, now, in hindsight. Don’t worry – this is not a matter of life or death, our meeting can easily be postponed. The most important thing is that my so-called adventure would not be a disturbance to you. If the heart doesn’t crave it, let’s not rush.”

Greimas responded quickly: “My Dear, I hurry to respond to your letter. Of course I want to see you.” In the letter, he assured his readiness to accept her in his home in Teresa’s presence or with her being away. On the other hand, Greimas warned that he was not willing to go anywhere together with Kasuba (to Chartres or Paris). Blaming his poor physical condition, he claimed he was capable of moving within a distance of only 200 metres. However, he and Teresa had travelled in Europe and even overseas. In addition, Greimas repeatedly reminded her of his feelings towards Teresa. He wrote: “I was in love with her – some would say that I still am – her mere existence really was an immense source of joy for me.”

Admitting this, Greimas specified the object of his sexual love, and offered Kasuba another kind of intimacy, a transformed intimacy. It seems it was neither expected nor previously experienced, and for this reason it went unrecognized by her. She kept writing to Greimas, reproaching him indirectly for not wishing to devote time to their meeting. At last, Greimas unambiguously informed her that it was not the lack of time but the possibility of her sexual-romantic inclinations that made him uneasy. He wrote to Kasuba: “It amuses me that I am to blame for not giving you enough time. I have plenty of time for you, but is it really needed? Do you really believe that I am capable of giving you at least an ounce of “happiness”? Given my present state, I have serious doubts. On the contrary, I am afraid I could even cause harm, disturbing your balance. On the other hand, could you do the same?”

Once again, he made it clear he was craving for a relationship that was different from a sexual one: “Everything that I wrote to you regarding the practical aspects of your trip stands. I do have time for you, I just do not have much to offer you…”

This was painful to hear for Kasuba. She neither accepted nor understood Greimas’ proposal and set out her response in point form. Point four stated: “I have cancelled my trip to France. I appreciate your openness for letting me know my visit would have been a burden for you.” At the end of the letter she even implied a farewell: “If I ever happen to be on your side of the world, I’ll drop by.” That’s all.

However, the correspondence between them was soon renewed. It seems Kasuba internalised the new aspect of their relationship and became aware of it. Both admitted that from now on, they had come to “understand each other”. There is no reason to think their correspondence continued solely in the form of an intellectual discussion between two professionals. Though Kasuba used to send manuscripts to him, Greimas had wondered what the purpose of her literary experiments actually was. In fact, Teresa was the one with whom Greimas had a genuine, professional collaborative relationship. The two were working on a dictionary and prepared joint publications.
In 1991 Kasuba visited Greimas and Teresa. Afterwards, she sent a warm letter of appreciation: “It was so nice to feel the warmth of your home.” She also wrote that his and her bond had become much more open and emotionally close. As she put it: “I brought away with me some sadness – reflections of your and my melancholy. Now we know that both you and I, we try hard to fight it so as to balance out our lives. Together with this sadness I acquired a feeling of completion – we really do understand each other now. It seems that only from now on our genuine friendship has started – a little strange, isn’t it? I still do not comprehend it fully, but I sense that new channels of perception have opened for me.”

This confession reveals an example of trust and mutual understanding with clearly defined individual autonomy. Thanks to Kasuba, Greimas recognized that same feeling. He wrote: “You do not penetrate into my life. On the contrary, you are a harbour of peace and trust for me: I had never met another person in my life whom I could trust more than you. You are the only one I trust totally.”

Giddens also talks about emotional passion in the form of the insatiable temptation to hear the Other. It is equal to physical touch. This very short message from Greimas “I wait for your letter” is followed by a similar response from Kasuba: “Your few words: ‘I wait for your letter’, sound like ‘give me your hand’. Here is mine – you have enhanced my life, Algirdas.”

If in traditional interpersonal relationships passion and eroticism are often achieved only through bodily and physical senses, transformed intimacy is capable of revealing other forms of eroticism, through reciprocity and mutual trust where power games are eliminated. Accordingly, even though Greimas writes: “I imagine you naked among other women,” and Kasuba responds “I love your every move and I want you as you are, and do not want to let you go, and this is how I stay in your arms”, both understand this eroticism as a specific form of emotional intimacy and a passion to know each other.

Transformed intimacy or so-called “pure relationships” do not imply a simplistic bond between two individuals requesting only respect and attention. They also have little to do with intellectual small-talk. It is more about permanent and complex negotiation which arises from romantic passion and proceeds on to mutual trust and the irresistible emotional thirst for communication and contact. As in the case of Greimas and Kasuba, it definitely brings out the feeling of satisfaction and the very important message that “the one” does indeed exist somewhere. As Giddens puts it, this is a vision of future interpersonal relationships that can lessen alienation and aggression in modern society.

We all know that the implementation of innovations often begins with artists and scholars, but only those who, like Greimas, are creators, after all.

**Footnotes**

