

The Welfare State

by [Stephen Schecter](#) (July 2019)



Paul Alexis Reading a Manuscript to Émile Zola, Paul Cézanne, 1870

I think I've fallen in love with my neighbor. I first became aware of that when he and his wife came for drinks one evening. His wife was talking with some friends of mine. He was sitting next to me, conversing and laughing with me about sundry matters when I felt a certain complicity, a complicity about matters that counted though we had not discussed those matters at all. Perhaps it was the way he talked about whatever it was we talked about. I could sense intelligence,

irony, and some good old-fashioned attachment to the eternal verities that made right and wrong seem strong as sentinels on Remembrance Day. And then there was his smile that lit up his eyes and made them sparkle. I think I may have fallen in love with his smile, the one that looks out at me every time he rings my doorbell or I his, or when we stop to chat outside the garbage shed attached to our common garage. I remember reading a novel by one of my favorite Israeli novelists in which he described how a man fell in love with the ankle of his wife. In the beginning of the novel the man's wife has died and the man spends the rest of the novel mourning her death. My neighbor is not dead, nor does he show signs of becoming dead anytime soon. Quite the contrary, I should say, which gives me years to consider whether or not I have fallen in love with him. Or at least to understand how a man can fall in love with his wife by falling in love with her ankle.

My boyfriend doesn't believe me when I tell him I think I've fallen in love with our neighbor's smile. He thinks I'm after his buns, which I do agree are cute. I would not say no if my neighbor ever offered them, but he would have to be the one to offer. I am more than happy simply to contemplate his smile and figure out why that alone fills me with felicity. My impression so far is that he is genuinely and solidly happy. The world as he knows it offered him choices, in light of these choices he made decisions, and now here he is, early retired, he and his wife up early every morning to hike before they spend the remaining hours that turn day into night and back again to day. I know he reads to keep up on things, all kinds of things. I know that from the emails he, a non-Jew, sends me, forwarding articles on Israel that offer perspectives in line with my take on things in that country. The articles indicate that what he once described to me as his old school stance when it came to asking kids to be respectful and responsible extends to adult behavior as well. I don't

know many Jews who would send me an article about the way Palestinian lies are an obstacle to Mid-East peace. But then he knows what a strong tradition is, coming from a city that had strong ones as well, which turned ethnic roots into street smart liberalism.

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Of course, these are all first impressions, which is why I look forward to years of figuring out if they are correct, something that does not happen when the spark to falling in love is first and foremost sexual. But they are strong enough, reinforced by each of our encounters, to give me food for thought, both about falling in love and about how to stay happy in an unhappy world.

Falling in love again. Marlene Dietrich sang that song. Sultry and slinking spilled forth the notes, the heart crying out for more disappointment. But disappointment puts no end to love, only spurs it on, especially today when sexual love asks for nothing more than its continual fulfillment and validation. But will you love me tomorrow? sang the Shirelles long after Marlene Dietrich stopped singing. So perhaps it is good to stay with the moment of falling. To say not I've fallen in love, but I think I've fallen in love, holding the moment of falling in suspended animation with no imperative for sexual coitus.

Given how much we have seen through in the various formulations to stabilize love, it is understandable that we still cling to the notion of falling in love, which is more than a notion really, being both organically and psychologically rooted. If we weren't impelled to fall in love, how on earth would we ever start up, let alone maintain, this utterly implausible condition of two people trying to make their relationship last? So we still fall in love, even though we know that love of God, love of Laura, love of the idea of love is not enough. And a good thing we do in this age where everyone is learning, albeit slowly, the art of making love last by, in Luhmann's words, solving problems together, compensating for pitfalls with Netflix and chill. Even Romantics like myself have to bend to the task. Given how love now requires nothing but confirmation of its own proclamation, it is perhaps a privilege to spend years contemplating the prospect of starting up, romancing the man without end, imagining the afternoon after all those afternoons the yearning malingered on the floor when one day he asks you to go to bed. This too is a gift of the welfare state, if we can understand that the welfare state is but a formulation of modern society's tendency to expand the possibilities of choice and care to its denizens. A self-description, as Luhmann would say, like love itself claiming every kiss begins with Kay, or he bought it at Jared's, it being a diamond for every pocketbook.



Who is Luhmann? you may ask. A lover? A prospective lover? To which I can only say no and no. Never was and never will be. He is my favorite sociologist, now deceased, who lives on in his writings that are never consulted enough, but which taught me to think properly about the modern world. He taught me to observe, for which I am very grateful, and so I am now

grateful for the welfare state, its downside notwithstanding. I even understand why so many respond with ingratitude. It is, after all, the fuel which keeps modern society moving along. My neighbor who most probably has never read Luhmann would understand that too, given the recent email he sent me about a suit brought by three women against Kellogg's for misleading marketing. It seems these women bought Cheez-It Whole Grain Crackers once a week, but when they finally read the label and discovered that the main ingredient was enriched flour, they decided they were entitled to compensation and took the company to court, even though one of the plaintiffs said she would continue to buy the product if the label on the package were changed. A federal judge dismissed the claim on the grounds that the wording on the box was factually correct and would not therefore mislead or deceive a reasonable consumer. The plaintiffs appealed and a higher court reversed the ruling, which led the author of the article to opine that America's reasonable consumer was deemed dumber than a box of crackers. Needless to say, the case is going on to further proceedings through the legal system, the plaintiffs wanting a class action to be filed on behalf of untold numbers of reasonable, contented cracker munchers like themselves. The author concluded the account with the following comment: *when people sometimes ask if the American legal system has lost its mind, this is what they're referring to.*

I personally do not think the American legal system has lost its mind, but I do understand the tendency to conclude this is so. It is not unlike the feeling people have that common sense has no place in society any more. The feeling comes from having to deal with so many people who only repeat the mantras of the expert systems they have been taught. Police who tell you they don't fingerprint for robberies under ten thousand dollars. Property managers who tell you no more than two board members can meet between housing association board meetings to

discuss association business because state law forbids it. Insurance adjusters for no fault insurance claims who explain they are going to ding you because they are not there to judge between you and the other driver who scratched your car. Customer service representatives from airlines who sympathize with your plight but recommend you email the appropriate address on their website with your complaint. Assisted living workers who forbid sexual contact between residents for their own safety. School principals who send kids home for settling their hash with an old-fashioned dust-up because there are better ways of dealing with teasing, though the kids never learn what they are. Politicians who tell you Islam is a peaceful religion because it is impolitic to say otherwise, even though Muslims have been shooting up places of western congregation as diverse as Christmas markets and rock concerts to shouts of Allah is great. The kicker, of course, is that all these mantras which drive us crazy also have what sociologists call a cooling out function. They aim to dampen down conflict, rage, violence, and bend us to compromise and charity. And they succeed in their task, for modern society is both less violent and more charitable than its predecessors.

Just look at how charitable modern society is. The government sends us old age pension checks that arrive on time. The unemployed also receive financial assistance instead of being shunted off to poorhouses and workhouses. Drug companies ensure men can have erections well past threescore and ten. Television advertising informs you about drugs that improve cancer treatments, prevent heart problems, deal with irritable bowel syndrome, incontinence, arthritis. It also tells you about lawyers who will sue on your behalf for exposure to asbestos or inadequate compensation for injuries sustained in car accidents. It informs you about new and improved cookware, appliances to remove unwanted hair, unobtrusive lighting for your garden, pillows to give you a good night's sleep, all but

a telephone call away. And then there are numerous groups in society also working on your behalf, protecting the environment, immigrants, embryos. Even the Pope has become a social worker. Let us also not forget Amazon, Netflix and Facebook, allowing you to shop, watch movies, talk to friends and lovers without leaving the comfort of home. When disasters happen half way around the country, not to say the world, you don't read about it three months later; instead, help is on the way, even to countries that threaten your own, and you can even contribute to the relief efforts by dialing some telephone number.

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All this works because there are protocols in place and people who are trained in them to see to it that the untold benefits of modern life are made available to you. But they do not come without a price, because even in modern society there is no free lunch in the universe. The good intentions which motor the society also cause problems, and the problems work both ways. The protocols make life difficult for people who often feel they have to jump through hoops to do the simplest thing, often to avoid being sued. But the people make it difficult for the expert systems, because their demands outstrip the solutions which governments, corporations, even local organizations have come up with to satisfy these demands. Everyone, not just the legal system, therefore suffers from overload. The people are a pain for the society, the society is a pain for the people, but everyone likes what modern life has to offer and jumps at the chance for more. Enter the left and the right to deal with this paradox which will not go

away. The left thinks we need more of what led to the mess to get us out of it; the right wants to call a halt to the whole shebang. Utopia or nostalgia, one might say, neither of which are adequate to the situation. Just like modern love, where people want both tender loving care and independence, romance and equality, intimacy and space, when what they really need is astute psychological understanding, or what Luhmann would call second order observation. Throw in a lot of patience and an ability to choose your battles wisely. Good advice for lawyers and politicians too. For everybody really, but the thing about good advice is people are rarely able to recognize it.

The neighbour I think I have fallen in love with is a man who seems to have understood this without even being a sociologist. He is smart, financially and technologically sophisticated, appropriately nostalgic but appreciative of the benefits that surround him, and still able, as I have said, to tell right from wrong. When he opens his front door he lets his wife know it is he and no other, unless another is with him. Surely that is a package worth thinking you may have fallen in love with and taking years to savor the idea. Maybe we should use a similar calculus when it comes to the welfare state: slowly, slowly, let the night horses run.

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