



# Distant Love

Ulrich Beck & Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim



## Distant Love



**Distant Love**  
**Personal Life in the**  
**Global Age**

**Ulrich Beck and**  
**Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim**

Translated by  
Rodney Livingstone

polity

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## Translator's Note

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Translating this book has been a pleasure, partly because of the liveliness and the absorbing interest of the text (some of which at least I hope I have been able to convey) and partly because of the assistance I have received from Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, who have been extremely helpful in answering my queries, and, in Elisabeth's case, making suggestions for translating some of the terminology. One of the difficulties in translating a book of this kind has been locating the large number of quotations from English-language sources. Albert Gröber has been indefatigable in tracking these down, and I am extremely grateful to him for coming to my aid so promptly. As always, my wife Krystyna read the translation right through twice and made countless suggestions and improvements.

Rodney Livingstone  
Southampton, February 2013



# Introduction

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In May 2011 the newspapers reported that the boxer Vladimir Klitschko (thirty-five, 6 foot 5 and weighing 242 lbs), originally from Ukraine and now living in Hamburg, had separated from the actress Hayden Panettiere (twenty-one, 5 foot 1 and weighing 110 lbs), who was living in Los Angeles. A newspaper quoted the actress as saying that the reason for the break-up had nothing to do with differences of age or height. 'It really is very, very hard to manage a relationship between two continents.' In an article in the same paper entitled 'Thumbs Down', Ingolf Gillmann criticized the actress for giving her long-distance relationship as the cause of the break-up. 'Dear friends, if you think a long-distance relationship is hard, how are you going to cope with the daily infighting of a close relationship over a period of years?'

A few days before that, a news item in the business section of the major newspapers throughout the world announced that Microsoft had bought Skype, the internet phone provider, for \$8.5 billion. 'Microsoft intends to integrate Skype into its existing products . . . With Skype users can make voice calls and video calls to each other via the internet free of charge . . . The service claims to have over 660 million registered users', according to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 10 May 2011.

Thus Microsoft appears to believe in the future of love at a distance – at all events this purchase is the most expensive in its entire history. Love at a distance in all its forms is also the subject of this book. In *The Normal Chaos of Love* we showed how individualism, aided by a romanticizing idea of absolute love, has undermined the

traditional forms of living together. The classic family, consisting of a man, a woman and one or more children, has begun to give way to a multiplicity of new types of family. Increasingly, the husband is replaced by the partner of the moment, single mothers and fathers have become more common, and patchwork families – i.e., new kinds of extended family – have emerged as the consequence of successive marriages and divorces. In our new book we open up the horizon to the *global chaos* of love, with every conceivable kind of relationship at a distance: mixed-nationality couples, people who migrate for work or marriage, women who rent out their wombs, and the utterly normal tragedies of Skype-mediated love relationships.

What we have set out to do is to provide an analysis of the present state of what we call ‘world families’, by which we mean love relationships and other forms of relationship between people living in, or coming from, different countries or continents. Such relationships may assume many forms and may arise from many different motives. However, world families in all their varieties share one feature in common: they are the focal point at which the different aspects of the globalized world literally become embodied. Global society simultaneously generates contradictory features in world families: unrest, confusion, surprise, pleasure, joy, breakdowns and hatred. We inhabit a world in which our loved ones are often far away and those from whom we are distant may well be those dearest to us.

The crucial point is that world families differ from the normal single-nation family, which has been the dominant form for so long, especially in Europe, and which has consisted of people speaking the same language, having the same nationality, and living in the same country and in the same locality. But they are also distinct from and represent something more than the multicultural families that have become an integral feature of the landscape in such immigration-friendly parts of the world as the United States and Latin America. World families form new kinds of combination; they come from near and far, from equal and unequal societies, and span whole countries and continents. Whether lovers or relatives in such families like it or not, they find themselves confronting the world in the interior space of their own lives. Thus the conflicts between the developed and developing worlds come to the surface in world families; they acquire faces and names. Here we find the meeting point of different languages, different pasts and different political and legal systems.

But when we speak of world *families* do we not simply adopt a concept that has long since been rendered obsolete by the variety of forms of love and life in Western countries – same-sex couples, single parents, patchwork families, companions for the current stage of life’s

journey and couples living together in separate houses? The Western observer could be forgiven for thinking so. But in non-Western cultures the concept of the 'family' continues to be of central importance. This means that, in what we term 'world families', opposing conceptions of 'family' collide with one another. We find here the flashpoint of religious wars that strike at the very heart of everyday life: these wars turn on the question of what a family is and who belongs to it, the nature of family and what it should be. In short, they strike at the heart of what constitutes a 'good family'.

All universalist social theories of love overlook these religious wars when they speak about the nature of 'intimacy' in 'modern life' in general, as did Anthony Giddens (1992), Eva Illouz (2012) and Niklas Luhmann (1986), and we too were guilty of this in *The Normal Chaos of Love* (1995). They all ignore the fact that what they regard as the universalism of modern love with its various paradoxes of freedom is only one of many possible developments, namely the version that has emerged in the historical, cultural, political and legal context of the West. These religious wars about what constitutes a 'proper family' fundamentally put in question all the unfulfilled promises about making freedom, equality and love compatible with one another.

Moreover, the universalist approach tends to be confined to a narrow range of experience: love between a man and a woman, between one woman and another, between two men – and perhaps also a child. In this book, by contrast, we take a broader view and examine subjects excluded from a national and universalist framework – love that transcends geographical, cultural and political frontiers, marriage-related migration, motherly love at a distance and baby tourism, as well as global patchwork families. In short, we focus on the globalization of love.

It is currently not possible to predict the future development of these chaotic relationships in the age of globalization. This does not mean that we include ourselves in the ranks of the pessimists of distant love, who maintain that we are faced with the prospect of the end of love, and who believe that its numerous shortcomings cannot be made good in principle. We prefer to ask the following question: Could it be that the very things that threaten the world at large will nevertheless register occasional successes in the new forms of love and the family and that we shall master the art of living together by transcending the borders that divide us?

# 1

## Globalization of Love and Intimacy: The Rise of World Families

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Art, literature, autobiographical novels and stories have given prominence to a new theme: colourful relationships involving love and families extending over countries and continents. These new realities are so widespread and full of surprises that they provide endless material for novelists and the producers of documentaries. There is a growing avalanche of books featuring such issues, exploring them in comic, tragic, ironic or sometimes even shrill tones. They are stories of love, marriage and parenthood across frontiers and cultural boundaries; stories about successful or failing relationships; stories showing how global conflicts come to the surface in the intimacy of family life. Here are three telling examples.

### 1 Comedies and Tragedies of Distant Love

Marina Lewycka's novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* deals with tractors only peripherally; it is concerned more fundamentally with an explosion. This explosion is female and enters Great Britain from Ukraine on a tourist visa with the single-minded determination to achieve marriage and acquire wealth and a residence permit. 'Two years after my mother died, my father fell in love with a glamorous blonde Ukrainian divorcée. He was eighty-four and she was thirty-six. She exploded into our lives like a fluffy pink grenade, churning up the murky water . . . giving the family ghosts a kick up the backside' (Lewycka 2005: 1). By dint of her energetic approach, her tender promises and the assiduous

deployment of her feminine charms, this blonde from Eastern Europe achieves her goal of a 'family passport' – i.e., marriage as the entrance ticket to the well-guarded prosperity club of the Western world.

She wants to make a new life for herself and her son in the West, a good life, with good job, good money, nice car – absolutely no Lada, no Skoda – good education for her son – must be Oxford Cambridge, nothing less. She is an educated woman, by the way. Has a diploma in pharmacy. She will easily find well-paid work here, once she learns English. In the meantime, he is helping her with her English, and she is cleaning the house and looking after him. She sits on his lap and allows him to fondle her breasts. (Ibid., 2–3)

Betty Mahmoody's book *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) is an autobiographical account based on Mahmoody's experiences when she found herself caught up between Iran and the United States, Islam and the West. The author, an American woman, marries a doctor who has come to the United States from Iran. He decides to return to his native country and tricks his wife and daughter into returning with him, only to detain them there by force. Betty Mahmoody complies on the surface but secretly plans her escape together with her daughter – an enterprise that finally succeeds after eighteen agonizing months and many highly dramatic scenes. The book is a tragedy in which love turns to hatred, with husband and wife at loggerheads and a plot characterized by violence and sacrifice, oppression versus resistance and freedom versus incarceration. It ends happily, however, with mother and daughter escaping from the clutches of sinister forces and returning to their home in America. Mahmoody's tale of women and suffering is a story of the death of a love caught between two worlds from the single perspective of a Western woman, with all her observations, hopes and disillusionments.

Jan Weiler's *Maria, ihm schmeckt's nicht* [Maria, he doesn't like it] (2003) describes scenes from the life of a German-Italian family in a series of anecdotes. The author, whose own life has such a background, regales his public with the comic scenes that can be found in the everyday life of such families from Central Europe. In this instance, the bridegroom comes from mainstream German society – more specifically, the upper middle class – while the bride's father is a guest worker who originally came to Germany from the impoverished Italian south. Once again, the episodes narrated by the author afford us an insight into the contrasting nature of different worlds,

though here it takes a comic form. German thoroughness, precision and pedantry clash with Italian temperament, mastery of the art of improvisation and *joie de vivre*, a clash that provides plenty of surprises, both amusing and less amusing, and possesses a certain rough-and-ready but also warm-hearted charm. In the end, the general message is positive: love is more powerful than the clash of cultures; it builds bridges over chasms.

Different though these three books are from one another, they nevertheless form part of a common narrative. They provide snapshots showing how the world society makes its entry into normal families, how it causes disruption, confusion, surprise, pleasure, joy, break-ups and hatred, and how the storms, crises and thrills of the world become integral components of the lives of ordinary families.

All three books featured prominently on the bestseller lists. They sold millions of copies and were translated into many languages. There are doubtless many reasons for this unexpected success. One is the fact that to some extent they all have biographical foundations, translated into a direct narrative style that connects immediately with readers and grips their attention. Added to that is a potent combination of the erotic and the exotic, and the entire confection is further enhanced by the admixture of comic or threatening scenes. Moreover, subjects of this kind reflect many readers' own experiences, and they can identify with the ups and downs, the pleasures and pains of similar events: my brother-in-law has taken a wife from Thailand; we have just engaged a Polish woman to look after Grandpa; our goddaughter has recently become involved with a theologian from Togo. Where actually is Togo? Does he truly love her or is he just exploiting her in order to gain entry to the developed world?

Connections and questions of this sort are looming ever larger in the everyday experience of the families of the host society. It is through such channels that the economic crises and financial markets of Asia find their way into our own living rooms, alongside the civil wars and political upheavals of Africa and the ideological conflicts and the economic ups and downs of Latin America. The woman from Thailand and the man from Togo are sitting on our sofa; they are present at our birthday celebrations, play football with our son and help to feed Grandpa. Everyone has a daughter-in-law, a son-in-law, a sister, a brother, a male or female cousin, nephews and nieces, grandchildren, etc., who speak our language with a foreign accent, who look different from us and whose names sound strange and

almost unpronounceable. Many people may feel relieved to read about scenes that might well come from their own lives and that are made unfamiliar as well as brought sharply into focus by the fictional or dramatic treatment they are given. Confusing events are rendered a little more comprehensible when they are shown to be the experience of many other people. We begin to appreciate that they too have difficulty in coming to terms with the new reality of the family; they too find it tricky dealing with the embarrassing situations and faux pas arising from these encounters between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The popular success of the books referred to above may also be due to the fact that they supply a larger context to the irritations associated with these novel 'diasporic' family networks. They show how one person's fate resembles that of others; they provide orientation and comfort, as well as practical help in the upheavals of the world society that have intruded into the realm of private experience.

The present book, too, is concerned with the turbulences produced by the encounter between proximity and distance. We propose the concept 'world families' as the starting point from which to examine the new realities of the family. Our chief questions are these. How can we describe and systematize developments that have long since become daily experience? How has it come about that love and families have become the point of intersection for global events? What happens when national frontiers and international legal systems, immigration laws and the boundary lines between host societies and minorities, between the developed and the developing world, pass directly through the family? What are the implications for love and intimacy if love becomes love at a distance, long-distance love separated by entire countries and continents?

To ask such questions is to enter *terra incognita*, unexplored territory. There are of course countless studies documenting changes in the family (from unmarried couples living together to the decline in the birth rate). And there are also studies of globalized families both in family research and, above all, in migration research and anthropology. But the crucial difference is that they always confine themselves to one aspect of the realities of the globalized family (mixed-nationality couples or cross-border adoption or long-distance relationships). In contrast, our aim is to examine such phenomena in context. It is for this reason that we have decided on the all-encompassing term 'world families' in order to inquire what it is that ultimately holds together these different forms. We explore their various meanings and commonalities, as well as their differences and

incompatibilities. All this is achieved by means of a 'diagnostic theory'.<sup>1</sup>

To anticipate our findings: world families are families in which world conflicts are fought out. Not all families are involved in all conflicts, but all of them are involved in a portion of them. Mixed-nationality couples experience the *tensions* that exist between two countries or between a host society and a minority group. Immigrant families experience the tensions between the developed and the developing world, the global inequalities together with their colonial history, whose after-effects persist in the minds of those living to this day, producing a reluctance to face the truth in some people and rage and despair in others.

We need to forestall a possible misunderstanding. The term 'world families' must not be confused with 'citizens of the world'. The latter expression refers to the caste of the educated upper-middle class, with

<sup>1</sup>We propose a distinction between explanatory and diagnostic theory in times of discontinuous social change. Some writers understand theory as an explanation of observable phenomena that can be perceived as the expression of general, universal 'laws' of social action and social life. They seek answers to the question 'Why?'. This conception of theory goes back to the practice of the 'hard' natural sciences, but it is not the dominant form of explanation. Contributions to social theory as this is widely understood internationally today follow a different pattern. Confronted by the chaos of social events and by phenomena that threaten to overwhelm us, they seek to establish a conceptual framework whereby we can orientate ourselves with the aid of a generalized diagnosis of rapidly changing social conditions. It is precisely for this purpose that we have introduced the term 'world families' in the present book. We are concerned not with a 'diagnosis of the age' in the language of everyday speech, but with generalized, sociological descriptions that are indispensable for a specialized, precise vocabulary – 'multilocal world families', 'multinational world families', 'distant love', 'migrants in search of marriage', 'surrogate mothers', etc. (see pp. 15ff., 65f.; chapter 10) We call this approach 'diagnostic theory'. This historical, inductive form of theory is especially relevant in times of rapid fundamental change in which not just ordinary people but even sociologists are confronted by the enigmas of a newly emergent social reality and find themselves asking where we are, where we come from and where we are headed. These are times in which the question 'Do we still understand the world we are living in?' has assumed greater urgency, both for sociologists and for ordinary people, than the question 'Why is what is happening, happening?'

But the connection between these two questions must be formulated more precisely. In times of discontinuous social change, explanatory theories presuppose diagnostic theories. Only when we have succeeded in describing and understanding the 'inner globalization' of intimacy, love, the family, relations between the sexes, housework, birth, maternity, paternity, etc., within a fully conceptualized theory will we be able once more to raise the question 'Why?'. Only then will it become possible to establish a better *modus vivendi* with the new discontinuities in the world and the contradictions they engender in people's everyday experience of love and the family.

its knowledge of Chinese literature, French cuisine and African art. In contrast, many of the people who belong to world families in our sense are neither knowledgeable nor open-minded about the world, neither at home on the international stage nor able to speak foreign languages. The breath of the great, wide world has utterly passed them by. Many have never previously left their home village or small town; many are provincial in their outlook and are wary of everything foreign. Some have become members of a world family only as the consequence of violence, civil war or expulsion, or in the hope of escaping from poverty and unemployment at home. Yet others have achieved the same result through dating advertisements on the internet or the accidents of love. In short, external events or actual coercion, rather than enthusiasm or an act of free will, have led many to become part of a global family more or less involuntarily. But, whether voluntarily or not, the different kinds of world family share one common feature: they act as an irritant. They do not fit our preconceived notions of what constitutes a family and is part of its essential nature, everywhere and always. They place a question mark over some of our familiar, supposedly self-evident assumptions about the family.

## **2 The Landscape of World Families**

A change of perspective will give us something of a panoramic view of the range of world families. Following examples taken from literature, we can look at instances taken from reality, a description of the forms of the family as we find them in the social reality of the twenty-first century.

### **Global Care Chains**

Worldwide differences of income make it possible for affluent families to employ home helps, nannies and carers from poorer countries. These poorer countries include the Philippines, a country that could barely survive without the remittances migrants send home to their families. For this reason, emigrating for work receives state support. In the port of Manila, the Philippine capital, for example, women receive training for jobs as servants in global capitalism. Among such women are qualified teachers, bookkeepers and veterinarians. They know how to teach mathematics, produce a balance sheet or cure a sick cow. Now they learn how beds are made in wealthy capitalist countries, in an American hotel, for

example, or an Italian household. They learn how a dishwasher works and about the toys with which Canadian or German children pass their time. At the end of six months they will have become 'qualified housekeepers', climb into a plane and hire themselves out in rich industrial nations.

Behind the closed doors of private houses and the family which are supposed to shield people from the turmoil of the world, the separate universes of the global poor and the upwardly mobile middle classes of the world are commingled. Teachers from the Philippines, students from Mexico, translators from Ecuador and lawyers from Ghana make their way to countries where nowadays women are to be found at the head of businesses, universities and political parties. However, the goal of such women migrants is to undertake work that has been regarded as women's work for centuries: they clean, cook, and look after children and the frail elderly members of foreign families.

By now, women, who commonly are in the minority in the job market the world over, amount to over half the total number of migrants. They represent the 'female face of globalization' (Hochschild 2000). Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the Philippines, a country that exports workers as other countries export coffee or cocoa, a country where thirty years ago women formed 12 per cent of emigrants, while today they are 70 per cent.

This has now become a worldwide pattern characteristic of our age: the greater the success women enjoy in the world of work, the more help they need in the home. This help is no longer provided, as in earlier ages, by slaves or servants but by the (shadow) global economy for cheap labour in a radically unequal world.

This creates a growing interweaving of destinies and situations that ignores frontiers and covers entire continents. The wives of the successful middle class, ground down by the persistent demands of their career and family, urgently seek relief, so that they inevitably have recourse to the services of the 'female global others'. Women on the other side of the world are in urgent need of money with which to feed their families. And a well-qualified Filipina teacher working here as a global nanny earns several times what she might expect from regular work as a teacher in the Philippines – if she could indeed find a job.

One consequence is that love and care become 'commodities', exported, imported and delegated to others by indigenous women. We may say then that globalized work in the family constitutes the 'gold of the poor', a further 'resource' that can be exploited by the rich. The poor also benefit financially from these transactions, though

admittedly they earn only a fraction of what the 'local', 'normal' workers would receive. Nevertheless, the great wide world is alluring, an imagined consumer paradise (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Hochschild 2003).

### **Global Inequality Becomes Personal**

Debates about immigration are premised for the most part on a clear line of demarcation between legal inhabitants and illegal immigrants, between those who are officially registered and visible and those who live in the shadows. People who think in the categories of the law make a clear distinction between legal and illegal. Many transnational families are a mixture of legal citizens and their illegal relatives whose lives are determined above all by the fear of discovery. One example is the Palacio family. Estrellita's mother is heavily pregnant. She has crossed the Mexican frontier in order to secure for her daughter the privilege of a birth in the United States and hence of American nationality. Estrellita's mother's brother-in-law is what the Americans call an 'undocumented worker'. The tightening of the laws on immigration in the United States has driven a wedge between members of the family. While Estrellita's status becomes more privileged, her mother's brother-in-law's fear of discovery intensifies. Among the seven siblings of the Palacio family, their marriage partners and their children, we find American citizens by birth, naturalized immigrants, people with limited rights of residence and undocumented immigrants.

Even this brief portrait affords us a glimpse of a 'melting-pot family' of a new kind. It is not merely multinational (and perhaps multi-religious); it is also 'multi-(il)legal'.

### **The Brave New World of Globalized Pregnancy and Birth**

A married couple from Germany waited two years for the arrival of their twins, who had been born to an Indian surrogate mother. The German authorities refused to issue passports to the children, who had been born in India, because surrogacy is forbidden under German law. The authorities in India – where surrogate motherhood is permitted – treated the children as German because the parents were German nationals. Accordingly, they refused to issue Indian travel documents for the twins. Their father, an art historian, fought a desperate battle in both the German and the Indian courts to be allowed to bring his stateless children to Germany. He was finally successful. The Indian authorities issued passports after all, and the twins were then given

visas with which to enter Germany ('exceptionally' and 'for humanitarian reasons', according to the German Foreign Office). The parents could now adopt their 'own children' in Germany by way of an international legal process.

Here we see that families are not simply condemned to being steamrollered by globalization. They have long since become agents. With the aid of the new options made available by reproductive medicine, birth and parenthood can be separated and 'offshored', like jobs. The scope for action created by medical technology makes it possible to separate conception, pregnancy and parenthood and to reorganize them across national frontiers. What used to be called simply 'motherhood' can now be broken down into such categories as 'egg donor', 'surrogate mother' and 'carer'. The attempt to combine these different forms of motherhood into a coherent legal form frequently turns into an obstacle race between the different and even conflicting provisions of national jurisdictions.

### **Grandparental Love at Distance**

Alex has just turned three; he is full of curiosity and energy. He loves muesli and chips and, even more, he loves his cars. He was given a new one yesterday, a big red bus, and this morning he was in a hurry to show it to his grandparents. They love their grandson more than anything in the world. They see him every day. Every day there is a quarter of an hour, and sometimes even half an hour, of 'Grandma and Grandpa time', a fixed ritual which is staunchly maintained and respected. It is time reserved exclusively for Alex and his grandparents.

A perfectly normal happy family? Yes and no. Those involved live hundreds of miles apart, the grandparents in Thessaloniki and Alex in Cambridge, England. Skyping brings Grandma and Grandpa into the nursery and transports Alex to Thessaloniki, while all of them remain where they are – love at a great distance as love of one's nearest and dearest, defying all distances and frontiers.

## **3 World Families Turn Established Notions Upside Down**

The pages of an atlas, with its black demarcation lines separating the differently coloured countries, are still symbolic of the mental and geographical maps that most people carry around in their heads and

that provide them with their picture of the world. The globe divides up into separate nation-states, and this encourages the expectation that every human being belongs in one place and one place alone for a specific period of time. This implies an unambiguous correlation between a person's identity and a specific location, and anything that deviates from this encounters mistrust and resistance.

It is true that everywhere in the world the majority of families live their lives in accordance with this homogeneous model of the family domiciled in the country to which it belongs by right – mother, father and school-age children dwell in one and the same household and locality, have one and the same citizenship and one and the same national origin, and speak one and the same mother tongue. This is a combination that common sense regards as both necessary and natural. But our present-day experience fits this model less and less well. More and more women, men and families have broken with what seemed hitherto to be a law of nature and live – partly by choice, partly by force of circumstances – in families that include strangers and distances.

Thus the point of entry for an assessment of the new landscapes of love and the family involves the following insight. We have to recognize that, for more and more people, three existential bonds that had always belonged together in the past – the bonds of place, country and family – have now begun to float free of one another and become separate elements. The belief that by their very nature families belong to a particular territory is overwhelmed by an active process of globalization both from below and from within. Just as there are transnational firms and transnational states (such as the EU), so too we are now witnessing the birth of transnational families. And this gives rise to a new set of questions. Do world families constitute a counterweight to global capitalism, opposing it by means of cross-frontier networks of mutual assistance? Do families have a future as a lived global politics? How can the disagreements that separate nations from one another be bridged, silenced, exposed, resolved, endured and perhaps even transformed into an opportunity to liberate people from the narrow-mindedness of national origin?

When people spoke of family in the past, what they chiefly meant was the innermost core of the family – i.e., father, mother and child – and this was always associated with the more or less explicit expectation of spatial closeness and living together. This rule did not preclude temporary periods of separation and, as with other rules, there were exceptions (seafaring families, for example). Fundamentally, however, it remained true that a family involved a direct face-to-face