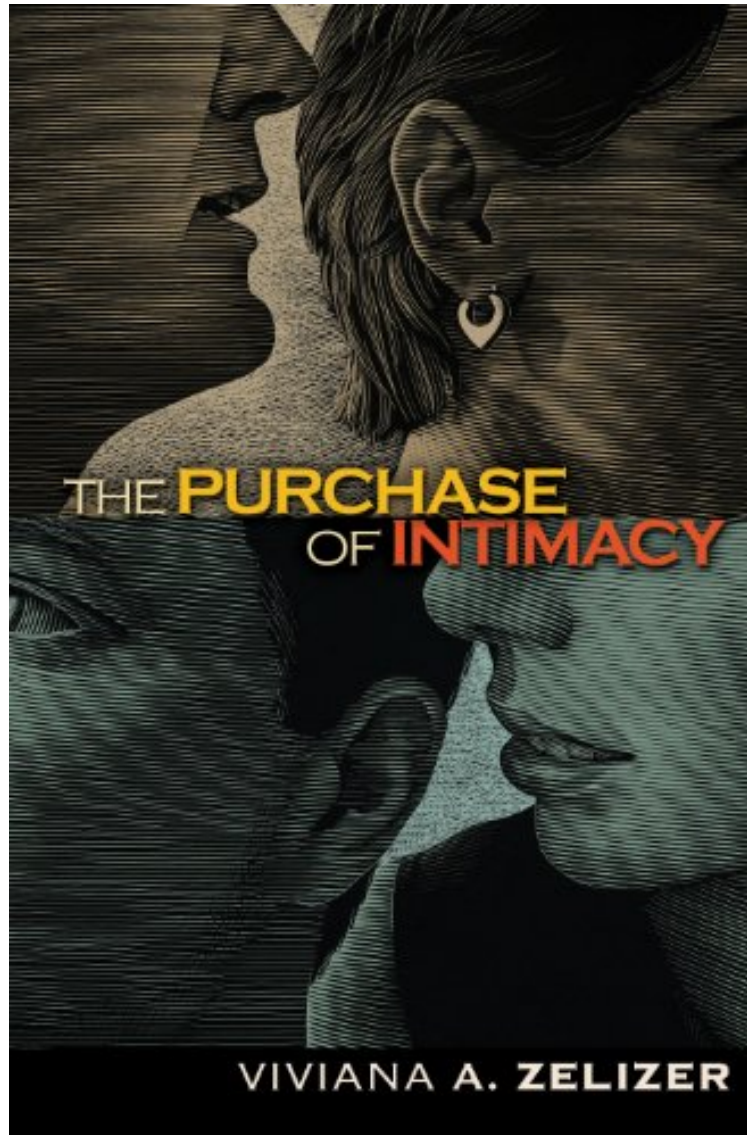


The Purchase of Intimacy

Viviana A. Zelizer

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Viviana A. Zelizer : The Purchase of Intimacy before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Purchase of Intimacy:

13 of 14 people found the following review helpful. A Gem, and this is Just the Beginning...By Herbert Gintis"The Purchase of Intimacy," says Zelizer, "deals with how people and the law manage the mingling of what sometimes seem to be incompatible activities: the maintenance of intimate personal relations and the conduct of economic activity." (p. 1) "You will find the coexistence of economy and intimacy hard to understand," she continues, "if you think that economic self-interest determines all social relations, if you imagine that the world splits sharply into separate spheres of rationality and sentiment." (pp. 1-2). Using almost exclusively legal cases, almost exclusively from

United States courts, Zelizer hammers home her point. The evidence she presents is anecdotal rather than statistical, but it is overwhelmingly convincing. Moreover, I doubt that the reader will not have encountered situations similar to those described in the book in their daily lives or by reading the newspaper. Zelizer has a minimal goal, that of illustrating the ineluctable commingling of money and intimacy, and she accomplishes this convincingly. Since there are several approaches to social theory that categorically deny Zelizer's minimal assertion, she goes to some length to address other theories and illustrate their shortcomings. This is very useful, because most of us harbor in our souls, implicitly and tacitly, elements of such alternative theories, which include some of the most prominent in modern social theory. One of these is the Dual Spheres paradigm common in socialist theory, according to which money corrupts and markets are evil unconditionally. Another is the Economic Reductionist theory that intimacy is a set of services that can be analyzed in the same manner as the provisioning of traditional marketable goods and services. Zelizer provides a critique of her own book, implicitly, by virtue of her success in proving her minimal thesis. If Dual Spheres and Economic Reductionist theories are wrong, what is the right theory? Zelizer does not even attempt an answer. Moreover, is there not evidence for a theory of intimacy beyond United States law? What about intimacy in other societies, such as would be studied by anthropologists? I could imagine a hundred studies of intimacy and economics in hunter-gatherer, small-scale agricultural, fishing, and herding societies. Indeed, what about intimacy and exchange of goods in non-human societies? Would such phenomena not shed light on the purchase of intimacy in human society? Almost as important for a general socio-economics of intimacy is an exploration of related themes in the arts, especially literature. There are truly masterful renderings of the structure of moral issues surrounding the purchase of intimacy in the English novel. Jane Austen and Emily Bronte surely come to mind, though my favorite exploration of this theme is Henry James' novel *Washington Square*, in which the intelligent and affluent Dr. Austin Sloper has a life-long relationship with his daughter Catherine, whom he resents for being the cause of his wife's death in childbirth. The doctor goes to great lengths to prevent his daughter's happiness, and she is too weak-willed to defend her interests. Nevertheless, Catherine remains loyal to her father, caring for him slavishly in his dotage, and making a decent life for herself out of the scraps afforded to her by her imperious father. Of course, stories like this abound, even in our own families, however far from *Washington Square*. It is most pressing to link intimacy with social theory in a way that brings the phenomenon into concordance with fundamental principles. In principle, it is not that hard to see how that might be done. First, we note that "intimate relationships" may be considered long-term interactions between pairs of individuals. This excludes many forms of prostitution as well as many forms of medical care. This is reasonable, since the equation of intimacy with caring for bodily functions is not plausible. There is, then, a standard economic/biological analysis of such long-term dyadic interactions, often summarized by "reciprocal altruism," as developed by biologists Robert Trivers and William Hamilton, and many economists, including Robert Axelrod. The basic idea is that there is some sort of tit-for-tat relationship that benefits both parties over time. The long-term, repeated, nature of the interaction is thus central to its constitution. In the case of some forms of human intimacy, the "pro quo" may come long after the execution of many "quids" (e.g., I care for my wife for many years, and she rewards me in her will upon death), thus complicating the relationship. But the basic nature of the interaction is well captured by reciprocal altruism. Economists used to argue, implicitly or explicitly, that all economic transactions could be codified in explicit contractual form, but we have long known that this is not the case. Moreover, there is contemporary evidence from behavioral game theory (e.g., Martin Brown, Armin Falk and Ernst Fehr, "Relational Contracts and the Nature of Market Interactions," *Econometrica* 72,3 [may] (2004):747-780) that when the reciprocal obligations are complex and difficult to measure, informal relationships based on trust and moral obligation work more equitably and efficiently than explicit, court-enforceable contracts. The sorts of complex reciprocal relationships documented by Zelizer involving both material exchange and intimacy can be seen as instances of such informal contracts. The next stage, theoretically speaking, is to recognize that long-term interactions, especially when they involve intimacy, often pass from individual motives of rational self-interest to affective identification with one's exchange partner, so the well-being of the other becomes incorporated into each agent's objective function in some, often complex and even contradictory, way. Thus, relationships that begin in fairly utilitarian ways (this can even include marriage) are transformed over time into deeply affective relationships (love/esteem/hate). These affective, other-regarding, aspects of a relationship are present in most strategic interactions, as we know from contemporary experimental economics, but they can become greatly heightened with the increase of intimacy and the passage of time. The gain from embedding long-term intimacy relationships in a traditional economic model with other-regarding preferences is that this allows for large-scale aggregate analysis of relationships and their dependence on such economic variables as the interest rate, the supply of certain kinds of services, the impact of various sorts of insurance, pensions, and the like. It would be hard to conceive of social planning for the economics of care-giving, for instance, without the benefit of such analytical models.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars
By Jennysuch a great book! thank you!
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars
By Benjamin Johnson
Viviana just makes a history book more interesting to read

In their personal lives, people consider it essential to separate economics and intimacy. We have, for example, a long-

standing taboo against workplace romance, while we see marital love as different from prostitution because it is not a fundamentally financial exchange. In *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Viviana Zelizer mounts a provocative challenge to this view. Getting to the heart of one of life's greatest taboos, she shows how we all use economic activity to create, maintain, and renegotiate important ties--especially intimate ties--to other people. In everyday life, we invest intense effort and worry to strike the right balance. For example, when a wife's income equals or surpasses her husband's, how much more time should the man devote to household chores or child care? Sometimes legal disputes arise. Should the surviving partner in a same-sex relationship have received compensation for a partner's death as a result of 9/11? Through a host of compelling examples, Zelizer shows us why price is central to three key areas of intimacy: sexually tinged relations; health care by family members, friends, and professionals; and household economics. She draws both on research and materials ranging from reports on compensation to survivors of 9/11 victims to financial management Web sites and advice books for same-sex couples. From the bedroom to the courtroom, *The Purchase of Intimacy* opens a fascinating new window on the inner workings of the economic processes that pervade our private lives.