

## Rezensionen

EVA ILLOUZ (2026).

### Emotional Technologies.

*How Techno-Capitalism Exploits Our Subjectivity.*

Cambridge: Polity. 108 Seiten.

Digital technologies are often associated with automation and objectivity, alongside a growing fear that machines are replacing human emotion. Rather than adopting this perspective, *Emotional Technologies: How Techno-Capitalism Exploits Our Subjectivity* argues that contemporary technologies have instead become highly emotionalized. Eva Illouz examines how digital platforms do not diminish emotional life but actively cultivate and exploit it, making emotions the raw material through which techno-capitalism generates economic value. Instead of extracting value solely from labor or material resources, contemporary capitalism targets more and more the subjectivity itself, producing technologies that both respond to and shape users' emotional lives. Similar to Sara Ahmed's understanding of emotions as circulating between bodies and institutions, Illouz shows how digital platforms organize these circulations, transforming affective exchanges into measurable and profitable forms of emotional data.

Eva Illouz, director of studies at the School for École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, is known for her work on the relationship between capitalism, culture, and emotions. In books such as *Cold Intimacies* (2007), *Saving the Modern Soul* (2008) and *Happycracy* (2018), she examined how capitalism reshapes emotional life and individual subjectivity. Based on a public lecture delivered in February 2025, *Emotional Technologies*, published by Polity Press in 2026, extends these concerns into the digital age. Written as an essay, it traces how emotions have become the central infrastructure through which technology and the economy intersect, making it a valuable contribution to digital sociology, media studies, and critical theories of contemporary capitalism placing emotional experience at the center of technological development.

In the introduction, Illouz's main goal is to position the reader, directly addressed as „you“, as a part of the techno-capitalist world. In doing so, she introduces two seemingly distant but overlapping phenomena: prosumption and self-help culture. By examining the ways in which emotions are continuously consumed and produced by and through technology, Illouz argues that we are witnessing an unprecedented emotionalization of technology. Rather than emptying humanity of its emotionality, as technology is often assumed to do, digital technologies increasingly make emotions the raw material of economic production, simultaneously producing emotions while being shaped by them.

The first chapter, „Co-Production of Emotions and Technology“, introduces five ways how emotions and technology co-produce each other. First, digital communication increasingly mimics interpersonal emotional interaction through emojis, GIFs, stickers, and other standardized visual languages that integrate emotional expression into everyday messaging. More importantly, they are not necessarily just a visual translation of words but sometimes even a representation of ideas or emotional states for which there is no single specific word. Second, social networking platforms engineer emotional circulation by transforming attention into an economy driven by likes, reactions, virality, and constant feedback. Illouz traces the emergence of these techno-emotional features through platforms such as YouTube and Twitter, while also illustrating their effects through public figures such as Kim Kardashian and Paris Hilton. Third, digital services such as meditation applications, dating platforms, and AI chatbots directly market emotional regulation as purchasable commodities, which Illouz terms „techno-emodities“. Fourth, users' emotional expressions become valuable datasets mined for commercial and political purposes through algorithmic profiling and targeted advertising. Finally, virtual environments, from multiplayer games to AI companions, produce emotionally immersive experiences that blur the distinction between fictional and real engagement. Unlike traditional fiction, virtual emotions are sharpened by an augmented sense of reality, to the point where identification alone may no longer explain what happens. Throughout the chapter, Illouz demonstrates that contemporary technologies increasingly function by embedding themselves within emotional life rather than operating independently from it. The second chapter, „The Intersecting Logics of Capitalism“, situates these technological developments within a broader transformation of capitalism. Illouz argues that technology has become the site where multiple capitalist logics converge: commodification, advertising, marketing, branding, quantification, standardization, and continual innovation intersect within individual subjectivity. Social media profiles become simultaneously personal identities, advertising spaces, branded personas, and measurable datasets. Individuals are encouraged not only to consume commodities but to continuously produce themselves as marketable products whose emotional performances generate economic value. In this framework, the self becomes both producer and commodity, collapsing traditional distinctions between production and consumption into what Illouz describes as techno-capitalist subjectivity.

„The Economics of Techno-Emotions“ develops this argument further by examining how emotional engagement directly fuels digital economies by assessing its different segments. Illouz discusses emotional pictography, affective labor on social media, emotional self-improvement applications, personal branding, emotional data extraction, and multiplayer gaming economies to demonstrate how feelings increasingly function as productive assets. User interactions, often

experienced simply as communication or self-expression, generate measurable economic value for technology companies through data collection, targeted advertising, and platform engagement. Emotional labor, once largely confined to interpersonal service work, now permeates digital participation itself, with platforms transforming everyday emotional expression into profitable forms of data production. The fourth chapter, „Making Emotions into Science Fiction“, turns to popular culture, particularly *Black Mirror*, to illustrate the cultural consequences of techno-emotional capitalism. Illouz interprets episodes centered on reputation systems, avatar identities, and virtual realities as speculative yet increasingly recognizable extensions of contemporary digital life. Technologies enforce emotional positivity through visible systems of evaluation, transform everyday life into performative spectacle, and intensify emotional investment in fictional identities. Rather than treating science fiction merely as entertainment, Illouz uses these narratives to expose existing tendencies within platform capitalism, where emotional authenticity increasingly becomes performative and measurable through technological mediation.

In the conclusion, Illouz reflects on the broader consequences of emotional cyborgization. Drawing on Yasmin Ibrahim's concept of the machinic bind, she argues that digital technologies have become deeply embodied within human emotional experience. This integration produces three major effects: the erosion of direct experience, a condition of crowded loneliness in which emotional needs are increasingly satisfied through mediated interactions, and an exit from reality, where performed authenticity replaces shared notions of truth. Virtual emotional experiences are no longer experienced as secondary or fictional but increasingly constitute reality itself. Illouz concludes that the economic exploitation of emotions extends beyond consumer culture, reshaping social relations, democratic participation, and the very conditions under which reality is collectively negotiated. Her analysis ultimately calls for a renewed critical theory capable of understanding how contemporary capitalism governs subjects through emotions rather than despite them.

*Emotional Technologies* offers a contribution to contemporary debates on digital culture by placing emotions at the center of techno-capitalism. The essayistic format allows Illouz to move across a wide range of examples, from social media and AI to dating apps, to virtual worlds and the *Black Mirror* series, to illustrate how technology and emotions continuously co-produce one another. However, emotional experiences mediated by technology are often interpreted primarily through their incorporation into capitalist value production, leaving comparatively less space for considering forms of emotional agency, collective resistance, or alternative digital practices that exceed commodification. Although its brevity inevitably leaves some questions open, also including the diversity of digital experiences beyond Western platform economies, the book succeeds in presenting a coherent account of how technology could reshape our emotions and social relations. By

demonstrating that technology increasingly manufactures, measures, circulates, and monetizes emotions, Illouz reorients discussions of artificial intelligence and digital media away from questions of technological autonomy toward the emotional infrastructures sustaining contemporary capitalism.

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