

Preface and Acknowledgments

The social does not “influence” the private; it dwells within it.

Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia*, 1975

Some years ago, my very first undergraduate essay in sociology posed a beguiling question. It simply asked me to discuss the proposition that “sociology is not interested in people.” I wrote my answer, attacking the claim, and soon learned that this was not what my tutors wanted to hear. Sociology, I was told, was concerned with social structures and social facts. It used the comparative method and examined the major patterns, transformations, and contrasts in social orders across time and space. As I got a lowish mark, so I learned my first lesson. And, of course, my tutors were right; these are indeed the grand claims of sociology. I should have known better than to believe that sociology was concerned with people. That was the concern of biology, psychology, the arts, maybe even humanism—but certainly not sociology.

Luckily, a few years on, as I struggled to use sociology to make sense of my own life as a young gay man, I encountered some books that told me this convention was really not the whole story. For there was, I discovered, a vibrant strand of thinking in sociology that traced social action, conversation, subjectivity, and biography, as well as the personal life, as valuable fields of inquiry—from Max Weber through C. Wright Mills and Peter Berger and on to modern feminist theorists. Recent widespread interest in such topics as “emotions,” “auto / biography,” “identity,” and “bodies” continues to flag the fact that sociologists can fruitfully study worlds of personal life that have typically been seen as the domain of the psychologist and psychiatrist. Here, human lives become matters of social actions located in historical moments (time) and practices bound into specific places and “habitus” (space). Our very feelings, bodies, sexualities, and ways of thinking take on different patterns under different social conditions. Human nature is not a very human thing; it is indeed a very social thing.¹

The personal life—its twists and turns—is hence an important part of sociology; a subfield might be called the “sociology of intimacy.” The phrase embraces a myriad of arenas of personal life that were once perhaps taken for granted as “just personal matters” but no longer can be. Some of these arenas are well known and much studied, such as gender and families. Others have started to be studied, such as emotions and bodies. Still others

have hardly been noticed: most of the senses, for example—we have yet to really ponder what the sociology of smells, sights, and sounds would look like (although a sense of this can be found in Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process*). For me, this is part of what might be called a critical humanism.² A sociology of intimacy can show how these personal lives assume different patterns under different social orders; can contextualize them across life cycles; can show the ways in which all aspects of intimacy involve “doing things together”³—doing gender, doing sex, doing relationships, doing bodies—and can show the links between intimacies and inequalities, such as class, ethnicity, gender, and age.

My own concern in this book lies with the seemingly rapid changes that are taking place across the world in the personal life (from test tube babies and cybersex to lesbian and gay marriages and families and single parenting) and the emerging arenas of public debate that are forming around them. For many people in the late modern world, there are decisions that can, and increasingly have to, be made about a life. I am interested in how these personal decisions connect with public debates. I am concerned with how our most intimate decisions are shaped by (and in turn shape) our most public institutions: how the public may become more personal and the personal become more public. This has long been a concern of sociology, most famously perhaps with C. Wright Mills's exhortation to connect “the personal troubles of milieu” with “the public issues of social structure,”⁴ or what I prefer to see as personal sufferings and public problems.

The book follows a direct line; and as it builds an argument, it is not a series of separate, disparate essays but an interconnected whole. It starts by establishing the range of changes surrounding the personal life that have been happening in the past few decades—most of which are leading to a sense of new intimate troubles and difficult choices. I do not want to overstate the changes, but I do believe the force of evidence is enough to suggest that something powerful is going on in our personal lives and that future generations may well come to live in a very different world. Indeed, just as my great-grandparents would find the world I now live in to be one of truly amazing changes, so I suspect that upcoming generations will find the lives we are living now to be barely recognizable. Change is in the air—as it has been for the last three hundred years or so—and it is the backdrop to this book.⁵

Change brings fears, and we find many conflicts developing around changes. Chapter 3 provides examples of the “culture wars.” Some of the conflicts outlined there seem to generate irreconcilable positions and lead

almost to tribal warfare. Both *conflict* and *change* hence form the backdrop to this book and provide the “problems” to which I want to respond.

Chapter 4 develops the core organizing concept to deal with such problems: *intimate citizenship*. I suggest some of the major controversies surrounding the use of such a term and go on to claim that a newish form of *doing citizenship* is in the making.

Four themes provide the framework for the rest of the book, chapters 5 through 8. I look at how the public sphere is being radically redrawn in the twenty-first century. The phrase “intimate citizenship” senses the crucial role of pluralism and conflict along with the need for dialogue across opposing positions. I highlight the importance of stories of grounded everyday moralities in resolving ethical dilemmas and search out the ways in which many of these issues now figure on a global stage.

My aim is simply to introduce a range of ideas about change, intimacies, and politics—many of which are not in themselves new, but which have not been placed together like this before. Although the ideas have had a long gestation,⁶ they remain provisional and will benefit from some refinement. A synoptical book like mine is a way of setting out the views in the debates.

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