INTIMACY: FROM TRANSFORMATION
TO TRANSMUTATION[1]

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Abstract: The paper reflects the historical and current dynamism of the concept of intimacy. Besides differences between scientific disciplines in understanding what the substance of intimacy is, the recent discourse on change in intimacy has been dominated by the transformation theme introduced by Anthony Giddens (1992). Led by reflections of Richard Sennett (1986) the author draws attention to the opposite aspect of change in intimacy—the change in content, or the "transmutation" of intimacy. Transmutation of intimacy—the substitution of the satisfaction of intimate needs with identity creation—not only contests the very essence of intimacy, but also constitutes a significant challenge for the project of intimate citizenship (Plummer 2003).

Keywords: intimacy; transformation; transmutation; intimate citizenship.

Concept of Intimacy

The psychologist Karen Prager writes the following about the positive function of intimacy in our life: "intimacy is good for people. Intimate involvement seems to promote human well-being" (Prager 1995, 1). In her view, this is not a sort of surplus value, luxury or luxurious state. Prager says that "intimate relationships seem to buffer people from the pathogenic effects of stress… and intimate interactions may account for many of the health benefits that intimate relationships provide" (*ibid.*). People who lack intimate relationships are at direct risk of "a variety of ills… Self-concealment has been associated with illness and symptoms of distress, ...relationships that do not allow confiding fail to provide the beneficial effects of those that do" (*ibid.*, 2).

If the function of intimacy is so important, it is worth thinking about the ontology of intimacy. What is its quintessence? In my earlier study (Bianchi 2003) I examined the place of sexuality in human intimacy and the boundary between the public and the private which had been irreversibly transcended by sexuality. Automatically assuming the intimacy of sexuality no longer holds and thus new contents have to be sought in our contemplations on the content of privacy.

Erik H. Erikson (1968) outlines his ideas on intimacy in a complex presentation of the individual development of identity. For Erikson intimacy is a counterpoint as well as a fusing point of identities in formation. Intimacy with another person may be intimacy with a friend, in an erotic encounter or in joint inspiration. Young and/or immature people who are not sure of their identity shy away from interpersonal intimacy or throw themselves into acts of intimacy which are "promiscuous" without true fusion or real self-abandon.[2]

Thus, we may assume that for Erikson intimacy is *a process and a structure (or state) of self,* not necessarily committed to any particular content. Intimacy qualifies a certain level of self-identity, which necessarily involves opening and authentically approaching either oneself or other/s. Even Jamieson considers intimacy with oneself (i.e. opening to oneself) to be a precondition to intimacy with other/s:

> We must seek intimacy with ourselves before we start seeking it elsewhere. How difficult it is, is well illustrated by evidence from empirical research indicating that if intimacy is sought purely as a realization of the self through another then it is inherently contradictory (self and other can never be totally one) and bound to fail (Jamieson 1998, 154).

In his book Seven Levels of Intimacy (2007), Matthew Kelly reveals the seven-level hierarchy within which an intimate relationship can be fulfilled psychologically. The author calls this the first level cliché; it is a relationship in which cliché communication dominates. Cliché is no asset to the quality of relationship and does not guarantee any developing potential: however, it is useful in establishing contacts. Teenagers use a lot of clichés: they are afraid of opening themselves for fear of criticism. The second level is called the level of facts; a relationship where the second level dominates is characterized by communication about facts—the weather, sport, about what we have been doing today, a metaphor valid here being "What is hidden behind the facts?" Exchanges of views, rational and value argumentation are characteristic of the third level of intimacy within a relationship. At the fourth level of intimacy, partners open themselves to their hopes and dreams and they are able to talk about their common future; the discussion about values is thus shifted to the position of talking about their aims, since the aims express values. At the fifth level our feelings are shared, given and accepted. The sixth level of intimacy is simultaneously the first level, which concerns negative aspects of our being—faults, fears and failures. We have become vulnerable from emotionally opening ourselves at the preceding level but here we are exclusively concerned with our weakness. It is the intimacy of opening the conscience, coping with the past and forgiving. Kelly calls the seventh level "legitimate needs". The coexistence of two people within an intimate relationship becomes at this level a real dynamic collaboration. Our legitimate needs come from each of the four life domains— physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Our intimate communication at this level is concerned with building a lifestyle that will fulfill the needs of the two partners and/or e.g. children, parents, etc. within a particular relationship.[3]

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[2] The counterpart of intimacy is according to Erikson (*ibid.*) distanciation, the readiness to repudiate, isolate, and, if necessary, destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one's own.

[3] To describe the contrast to these intimately shared relationships that go beyond the intimate relationship Kelly employs the term "illegitimate wants".

The crucial fact in Kelly's hierarchy is that satisfaction of needs is placed at the top level of the fulfillment of intimacy. Of course, within this level of intimacy, the point is, as Kelly calls it, dynamic collaboration in creating the lifestyle built on the fulfillment of the needs—from bodily to spiritual.

Giddens and the Transformation of Intimacy

Anthony Giddens in his sociological approach to intimacy (Giddens 1992) is driven by the dynamics of the current transformation of intimacy. His view of intimacy is "narrow", exploring intimacy within the realm of love-and-sexuality in a relationship. Giddens's focus on the transformation of intimacy concentrates mainly on three concepts—plastic sexuality, confluent love and pure relationship, all of which are, in principle, expressions of the transformation of the "*form*" of intimacy, not of its content.

The plasticity of sexuality is according to Giddens (*ibid*.) represented by all non-conventional forms of sexual experience, starting with non-marital sex, through all kinds of non-heterosexual sexuality up to current non-normative forms of sexual experience, e. g. "swinging" or virtual sex.

The second and third new concepts introduced by Giddens, confluent love and pure relationship, are closely related to each other:

> *Confluent love* is active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the "for/ever", "one/and/ only" qualities of the romantic love complex. The "separating and divorcing society" of today here appears as an effect of the emergence of confluent love rather than its cause. The more confluent love becomes consolidated as a real possibility, the more the finding of a "special person" recedes and the more it is the "special relationship" that counts.
> Confluent love presumes equality in emotional give and take, the more so the more any particular love tie approximates closely to the prototype of the *pure relationship. Love here develops only to the degree to which intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other…* Confluent love for the first time introduces *ars erotica* into the core of conjugal relationship and makes achievement of reciprocal sexual pleasure a key element in whether the relationship is sustained or dissolved (Giddens 1992, 61–62) (italics added).

From Transformation to Transmutation of Intimacy

Much of what I argue in this part is based on (1) the contemplations of Niklas Luhman, who, in his work *Love as Passion: the Codification of Intimacy* (1986), analyzes a radical change in understanding intimacy in western culture from post-feudal times to modernity with a focus on the semantics of love; (2) Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (1986) that points to the negative consequences of the pressure on shared identity and which leads to group conformity and an expectation of the maximalization of intimacy, and (3) Z. Bauman's *Liquid Love* (2003) that describes how relationships and expectations, i.e. intimacy, entered the scheme of consumerism.

Niklas Luhman (1986) sees the 17th and 18th centuries as the beginning of the codification of intimacy. The print media and the novel created what we would call today an intimate partnership. This concept had not existed in European culture until then. The

century that followed witnessed the advent of modernism and the "system" of intimate relationships developed and was institutionalized. However, the onset of modernism also brought a parallel process, which saw a weakening of the influence of the Church/religion in society. Religion, which up until then had functioned as a bridge between the individual and society found itself having to compete with the institution of intimacy. Although Luhman maintains that the codification of intimacy did not replace the function of religion, it started to operate in much the same way.

Luhman calls intimacy "interpenetration" and he classifies its function as (mutual) understanding (*ibid.,* 186). He postulates this concept of intimate understanding as:

1. the incorporation of the environment and the relationships found within this setting into the observation of the observed system so that we can simultaneously become familiar with the source of inner experiences and with the aims of the activities of the observed person;

2. the incorporation of information and information processing, i.e. the incorporation of alternatives and comparative schemes in relation to the messages experienced and selected within the observed system (person).

Ultimately, intimate understanding is essential to self-portrayal and provides internal devices necessary for this purpose; this also involves representation of the object of understanding. (Self) understanding in this sense is understood by Luhman as an ideal entity, which can only be approached by means of approximation.

Richard Sennett (1986) extends Niklas Luhman's identification of the historical roots of psychological intimacy through his radical view of the current content of intimacy. It is radical because it is the political construing of the changes intimacy has undergone over the last hundred years and more. Sennett expresses it as the advent of the ideology of intimacy, which "transmutes political categories into psychological categories" (Sennett 1986, 259).

Sennet writes about the three principles of the present in relation to the concept of intimacy: First, the dominating conviction of today is that closeness between people is a moral good:

> The belief in closeness between persons as a moral good is in fact the product of a profound dislocation which capitalism and secular belief produced in the last century. Because of this dislocation people sought to find personal meanings in impersonal situations, in objects, and in the objective conditions of society itself. They could not find these meanings; as the world became psychomorphic, it became mystifying. They therefore sought to flee, and find in the private realms of life, especially in the family, some principle of order in the perception of personality. Thus the past built a hidden desire for stability in the overt desire for closeness between human beings... Closeness burdened with the expectation of stability makes emotional communication—hard enough as it is—one step more difficult. Can intimacy on these terms really be a virtue? (*ibid.*, 259-260).

Second, the ruling aspiration of today is to develop an individual's personality through experiences of closeness and warmth with others:

> The aspiration to develop one's personality through experiences of closeness with others has a similar hidden agenda. The crisis of public culture in the last century taught us to think about the harshness, constraints, and difficulties which are the essence of the human condition in society as overwhelming… to challenge them, to become enmeshed in them, is thought

to be at the expense of developing ourselves. The development of personality today is the development of the personality of a refugee. Our fundamental ambivalence toward aggressive behavior comes out of this refugee mentality: aggression may be a necessity in human affairs, but we have come to think it an abhorrent personal trait (*ibid.*, 260).

Thus Sennett asks and immediately responds:

But what kind of personality develops through experiences of intimacy? Such a personality will be molded in the expectation, if not the experience, of trust, of warmth, of comfort. How can it be strong enough to move in a world founded on injustice? Is it truly humane to propose to human beings the dictum that their personalities develop, that they become "richer" emotionally to the extent that they learn to trust, to be open, to share, to eschew manipulation of others, to eschew aggressive challenges to social conditions or mining these conditions for personal gain? Is it humane to form soft selves in a hard world? As a result of the immense fear of public life which gripped the last century, there results today a weakened sense of human will (*ibid.*, 260).

And third, the ruling myth of today is that all the evils of a society can be understood as evils of impersonality, estrangement and coolness in human relations:

...the history of public life calls into question the mythology built up around impersonality as a social evil... the more people conceive of the political realm as the opportunity for revealing themselves to each other through the sharing of a common, collective personality, the more are they diverted from using their fraternity to change social conditions. Maintaining community becomes an end in itself; the purge of those who do not really belong becomes the community's business. A rationale of refusing to negotiate, of continual purge of outsiders, results from the supposedly humanitarian desire to erase impersonality in social relations... *The pursuit of common interests is destroyed in the search for a common identity* (Sennett 1986, 260-261; italics added).

The sum of these three principles creates an intimacy ideology that embodies the political transformation of a society. Sennett characterizes it as follows: "This ideology of intimacy defines the humanitarian spirit of a society without gods: warmth is our god" (*ibid.*, 259).

Meaning of Transmutation of Intimacy for the Agenda of Intimate Citizenship

The depiction of historical, political, psychological and sociological contexts of intimacy leads us to postulate that in the domain of intimacy we are witnessing not only the transformation (change of the form) but, particularly, the change of the content of the concept itself. In his work, Anthony Giddens (1992) gave detailed arguments on how the forms of sexual and partner intimacy altered with the change in the structure of society during late modernity: now we would like to point out a change in intimacy that is at least equally important. Despite the fact that even today psychological reasoning views the first function of intimacy to be the satisfaction of human needs (cf. Prager 1995; Erikson 1968; Kelly 2007), a chain of sociological arguments indicates a dramatic turn (cf. Luhman 1986; Sennett 1986). This dramatic turn has led to the fact that intimacy has become the source of an individual's identity in contemporary society—regardless of whether we are looking

at a particular society as being late-modern, post-modern, informational, globalized, multicultural… This change in the content of intimacy (from satisfying needs to identity building) might mean a fundamental challenge to the whole "project" of sexual citizenship (Evans 1993) and intimate citizenship (Plummer 1995, 2003). The difference between the two variants (cf. Bianchi 2003) consists in the fact that while Evans suggests incorporating the sexual agenda into all three basic groups of law (civil, political, and social, cf. Marshall 1950), Plummer does not confine himself to sexual intimacy, suggesting that the realm of intimate citizenship should also be added as number four to the three already accepted realms of citizenship:

> I call this intimate citizenship because it is concerned with all those matters linked to our most intimate desires, pleasures and ways of being in the world. Some of these must feed back into the traditional citizenship; but equally, much of it is concerned with new spheres, new debates and new stories... in the future people may have to make decisions around the control (or not) over one's body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc.; and socially grounded choices (or not) about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences (Plummer 1995, 151).

What sexual and intimate citizenship have in common is their attempt to find an optimization of the fulfillment of the intimate needs (in the first place) of the members of society who do not belong to the majority groups (heterosexuals, healthy people, people of productive age, members of the state-forming nation, etc.), but, currently, in spite of the boom of anti-discrimination policies, the door to the public space remains closed or at best half open.

This is why we now pose the question: *What will the project of intimate citizenship be about if we accept that the intimacy of otherness is chiefly concerned with the identity of otherness?* We find a very skeptical attitude in the contemplations of Zygmunt Bauman on the development of love in the postmodern age (in the author's terminology "liquid modernity"; Bauman 2003). Although Bauman formulated his position without being aware of this question, to a great extent he answers it when he states that in the present world of unbridled individualism, relationships are something of a blessing. They oscillate between sweet dreams and nightmares and it is not possible to predict when they will change from one shape to another. In this period of liquid modernity relationships are at their most common, most urgent, most deeply experienced and are the most problematic embodiment of ambivalence (Bauman 2003). And he continues: it is difficult to establish relationships in a consumer society, where norms are ready-to-use products, quick remedies, about immediate satisfaction, where results are achieved without any persistent effort, instructions/recipes are infallible, where all risks are insured, and refunds are guaranteed.

A study of the alternative scenarios of the developmental course of intimate citizenship that opened this account of the contemporary transmutation of intimacy appears to constitute an incredibly pressing challenge.

Intimacy and the Civic Arena: The Symposium

From the individual's viewpoint, intimacy concerns things located in different zones and at various distances from oneself: one's body, friends, family, gender, sexuality, emotions,

sensations, identities, spirituality (e.g. religiosity) and ethnicity. In all of these areas people have multiple needs and requirements. Due to restricted resources in the civic area (e.g. public spaces, time, privacy) intimacy needs give rise to conflicts and/or frustrations between individuals, cohorts, and generations.

In comparison to "traditional" citizenship (as regulated by civil, political, and social rights), intimate citizenship (as suggested by Ken Plummer 1995, 2003, for example) concerns specific aspects of societal processes, where intimacy, privacy and life-style are concerned. There are numerous subpopulations with specific lifestyle requirements and thus with a specific position on intimate citizenship—e. g. handicapped people, the chronically ill, public personae, young people, elderly people, ethnic minorities, etc.

The Call for Papers on the topic of intimacy resulted in a collection of contributions offered by a variety of experts in the fields of sociology, social philosophy, social psychology and applied ethics. Characteristically for the topic, two papers from this symposium address sexuality. These papers also have a specific "regional" aspect, yet they also reflect the most common questions faced by post-communist societies, where sexuality has become subject to politics in a "multiparty" clash between left-liberal, conservative and religious forces fighting over sexual education and sexual orientation. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the rest of the papers address intimacy as a general issue from various aspects—intimacy as related to the public-private divide and its role in the intimate citizenship project, the current transmutation of the content of intimacy, and ethical considerations on whether intimacy should be a criterion for caring.

My own text as presented above concerns the dynamics of intimacy. The debate, begun by Anthony Giddens (1992), focuses around the transformation of intimacy in the period of late modernity; I attempt to expand this discussion to include the content (not merely the form) of intimacy, where there is a pronounced trend, moving from "instrumental" content that serves the satisfaction of human needs to an intimacy that is exhausted by our urge for identities.

Ivan Lukšík and *Dagmar Marková* offer an empirical study of current discourses on sexuality. Taking as their starting point the recent introduction in Slovakia of a new textbook, by the national branch of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, on sexual education, which the Ministry of Education refused to formally acknowledge, the authors analyse the discursive resources of the public debate on this topic. As a result, they identify five tactics of power used by the Ministry of Education, the Catholic Church and the liberal NGO in the dispute over the introduction of the textbook. The discussion in this paper attempts to identify how power interacts with sexuality in public/policy debates of these kinds.

Štefánia Kövérová presents a theoretical reflection on the majority-minority interplay between heterosexuality-homosexuality. Basing her work mainly on Bourdieu, she challenges the traditional heterosexuality = majority, and homosexuality = minority ratio by examining the effects of symbolic capital, symbolic power and symbolic violence on sexuality as a social phenomenon. Her analyses are primarily motivated by the homophobic attitudes which dominate public opinion in Slovakia, but which are typical for the post-communist mix of, on the one hand, various kinds of liberalism and, on the other hand, open and hidden tendencies towards totalitarianism (expressed, for example, in the growing influence of Christianity and in inclinations towards political paternalism).

In his critical essay, *Paul Reynolds* explores the discourses which constitute the basis of the private-public divide (liberalism, conservative values, medico-moral discourse, and legal and political regulation). His aim is to highlight the counter-productive nature of this divide when we think of intimacy (with its sensory, emotional and affective phenomenology) as the central concept in the intimate citizenship project "launched" by Ken Plummer (1995), where intimacy is being transformed into "public intimacies". Reynolds brings compelling arguments from political philosophy which support his thesis that emphasizes that the (liberal) private sphere may be a serious obstacle to the introduction of intimate citizenship into everyday politics.

Munir Hossain Talukder has contributed to this Symposium with a critical examination of Michael Slote's specific view on the virtue of caring. Talukder advocates overcoming the narrow ethical approach in which admiration for caring (behaviour) is increased by the intimacy (meaning mainly privacy) of the social object, thus maintaining a bias between the social value of the intimate (private) social object vs. the social values of "other" social objects. Talukder thus brings a supportive deliberation into the debate on the importance of the intimate in the public arena, in the realm of the "public intimacies".

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