

Chapter 1

Introduction: the intimate life of dissent

*Harini Amarasuriya, Tobias Kelly, Sidharthan Maunaguru,
Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic and Jonathan Spencer*

Natalya Gorbanevskaya, one of the participants in a Red Square protest against the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, did something surprising: she brought her baby son to the demonstration even though she anticipated arrest. She pushed a pram with her child to the demonstration in the centre of the Square and unfurled a home-made banner. She then left the baby in the lobby of the KGB headquarters while she underwent an extensive interrogation. When asked by a KGB officer to name the father of her child, Gorbanevskaya refused, declaring that family issues were irrelevant. Yet in many ways her act of political opposition had been forged and sustained by relations with lovers, friends, family and with other dissidents. Gorbanevskaya's mother, for example, both supported and fretted over her daughter's political engagements. When Gorbanevskaya was charged with anti-Soviet agitation, her actions were said by the prosecutor to amount not only to a betrayal of the Soviet state, but also to a betrayal of her own children. She was cast as both a bad Soviet citizen and a bad mother. The jury then punished Gorbanevskaya with a lengthy confinement in a psychiatric ward, resulting in separation from her family and friends (many of whom shared her hostility towards the Soviet state). In one fell swoop, Gorbanevskaya seemed to have both transgressed and reinstated the boundary between the intimate life of sex and family and the public life of political protest. Her story shows what is at stake, both politically and personally, in acts of dissent.

The chapters in this edited collection examine those moments when people take a stand, acting in ways that go against the grain of social and political life, often at great personal risk. For Soviet dissidents, Kurdish activists, Sri Lankan leftists, Orthodox Jewish Israelis,

Indonesian students and prisoners, Tibetan exiles and British pacifists, acts of dissent are attempts to take a position of principle, to set oneself up against the status quo. We might view such acts of dissent within a range of possible interpretive frames, such as ‘resistance’, ‘refusal’ or ‘protest’ (McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2014; Weiss 2016), but we are particularly interested here in those acts where people declare or act on their commitments.

Dissidence implies not just strong dissatisfaction, but also determined and open opposition. Such acts of dissent are found not so much in forms of hidden and subtle resistance, but in the processes that Leela Gandhi has described as ‘actively renouncing, refusing and rejecting’ (2006, 5). In this collection we are trying to understand the conditions of possibility for such acts, and the culturally thick meanings and significance with which they are inscribed. We do not wish to romanticise dissent – conservatism and xenophobic nationalism can be dissenting principles, after all – but rather to put acts of protest and refusal back into the thick social and cultural relations out of which they emerge and take effect.

The term ‘dissent’ has a very particular and freighted history – linked most obviously with the Protestant Reformation and, more recently, anti-authoritarian politics and Cold War human rights (Arendt 1972; Havel 1989; Shelby 2018, 264). Underpinned by a specific view of personal freedom, dissent in this tradition is presumed to emanate from within the individual and has been strongly linked to ideas of ‘conscience’, ‘interiority’ and ‘authenticity’ (Boym 2010; Laidlaw 2002). Dissent here is a form of political disruption born in the moral individual. To dissent is both to protest in the face of injustice *and* to be true to oneself: a combination that Václav Havel called ‘living in truth’ (1989). Indeed, acts of dissent are seen to represent a residual and radical humanity that cannot be crushed by authoritarianism, totalitarianism or political horror.

Dissidents can be awkward in their commitment to freedom, even iconoclastic in the way they hold fast to their principles – but for them *not* to dissent would be somehow ethically corrupting. ‘Silence’, as Nadezdha Mandelstam put it, ‘would be the real crime against humanity’. The dissenting heroes of the liberal imagination are therefore people such as Mandelstam, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Václav Havel and Ken Saro-Wiwa. They may seem idiosyncratic and awkward, but their dissent is often seen as a positive virtue – one that not only allows the dissenter to be ‘true to oneself’, but also serves as a powerful social and political corrective to the injustice around them.

Although the term ‘dissent’ may resonate within the histories of liberal politics and Protestant Christianity, its meanings and implications are not constrained by those traditions. Ethnographic and historical evidence points instead to multiplicity: dissent – as an act of renouncing, refusing and rejecting – can assume many forms and is not limited to individual acts of moral protest. As Oustinova-Stjepanovic shows in [chapter 2](#), for example, dissent in the late Soviet period was manifest not only in public demonstrations, but also sometimes in seemingly absurd forms of conceptual exile and artistic estrangement. Similarly, Erica Weiss has suggested in [chapter 3](#) that the peace activism of liberal and ultra-Orthodox Jews may be defined by a common goal, but builds on radically different, even incompatible moral premises. If dissent is often associated with particular forms of freedom, individualism and aesthetics, these links are therefore not as self-evident as they might appear. Dissent, for example, can be thought of as a form of obligation or a duty as much as an expression of freedom. There often seems to be a sense (in Geertz’s (1968) formulation) that we are *held by* the convictions that ground our dissent, rather than that we *hold* them. Furthermore, even within the liberal tradition, not all forms of dissent are seen as equal. Individuals do not stand free and unencumbered, but are always marked by histories of inequality. Some people find it easier to enter the space of dissent than others. The sense that dissent somehow has its origins deep inside the individual can also cause unease, as a valorisation of sincerity produces anxieties about authenticity and dissenters can be viewed as degenerate trouble makers as much as moral saints. In short, there are many cultures of dissent.

The central argument of this volume is that foregrounding intimacy can help us to parochialise liberal notions of dissent, and their associated forms of agency, personhood and change. Dissidents are not simply lone individuals with abstract ideals; they are also caught up in other, sometimes contradictory aspirations and relationships and forms of responsibility. Dissent does not just reverberate through public acts, but also in the most intimate of relations, and the social world of dissidents and activists is often a place of especially intense sociality. For liberal theorists such as John Rawls (1993), dissent is carried out by abstract individuals, seemingly devoid of personal ties. When Rawls writes of anti-war activists and their acts of civil disobedience during the Vietnam war, it is as if they have no social relations and act solely as moral individuals alone against the world, weighing up what is good and right to do in the face of violence, coercion and domination. Yet the memoirs of dissidents are full of descriptions both of how they gained support

and succour from loved ones and of the tragic consequences of their action for their own families (Yakir 1972). Acts of dissent can therefore involve the making and breaking of specific intimate attachments of kinship, friendship and solidarity, just as much as commitments to high principles.

We understand intimacy here as being linked to the experience of familiarity within friendship, family and love, but as also going beyond that – opening up what Lauren Berlant has described as a ‘range of attachments’ that ‘links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective’ (1998, 283; see also Herzfeld 2005). Ties of family, friendship and sex are therefore not the only sources of intimacy, although they can be a very important part. Or, to put this another way, the intimate is exhausted neither by kinship ties nor the private realm. As Michael Herzfeld (2005) has argued, for example, the idea of the nation can be invoked through the register of intimacy too, creating shared frustrations, embarrassments and aspirations. Intimacy works across different scales, implying closeness but not necessarily proximity, gesturing to forms of broader mutual identification, at the levels of the family, but also of the nation, the religious community or other publics. In this process, and importantly for our argument, the very distinction between private ideas and public action begins to break down. Intimacy is also not an inherently positive experience or virtue: it can be fraught, claustrophobic and coercive, as well as caring and supportive.

Thinking of dissent as intimate helps us to move beyond the narrow notions of the individual by putting dissidence back in the histories of the dense social relations from which it emerges (Berlant 1998, 282; Berlant and Warner 1998, 553; see also Laurie and Stark 2017, 73). We might say that dissent is both enabled and contained by our intimate relations, and we can only understand the intensity of acts of dissent, and the risks they entail, if we also understand the intimate ties, tensions and contradictions within which they are enmeshed. Intimate ties can exist in tragic tension with forms of political dissent, or they can provide the energy upon which dissent thrives. Either way, we cannot understand dissent unless we understand its often fraught relationship with intimacy.

At one level, putting intimacy and dissent into the same frame might seem an awkward move. In the popular imagination, dissidents are moved by a commitment to what is right or wrong that transcends their own narrow self-interest and personal ties. Bonhoeffer, Havel and Saro-Wiwa went to jail and Bonhoeffer and Saro-Wiwa were executed for standing firm by their ideals; they left behind lovers, children, family and friends, who could only watch in a tragic mixture of admiration and

despair. As the anthropology of ethics has tried to show, many people act out of a deep commitment to ideals of what is right, good and just, rather than the partiality of specific ties and interests (Laidlaw 2002; Schielke 2015). These are ideals that, as Samuli Schielke argues, can appear distant, ‘external and superior to everyday experience’ (2015, 13). And as Alberto Toscano (2010) has similarly argued, people are often moved by abstract ideals in a way that makes political action both possible and imaginable. Ideas of class, nation and religion evoke much more than the here and now. That is precisely why they are such a powerful force in people’s lives, one that can compel them to act under the most difficult of circumstances.

We should not though overplay the distinction between abstract commitments and intimate relations. If intimacy is not simply about known personal relations, but also about wider ties of familiarity (Herzfeld 2005), the lines between intimate relations and abstract principles blur. At one level, convictions are shaped and given meaning through the dense flux and flow of relations with friends, children, parents, siblings, lovers, comrades and others. Commitments are rarely just commitments to ideas, but also, as Michael Walzer (1970) has pointed out, obligations to people who we might know, love and respect. People tend to die, for example, not simply for country, God or class, but also for friends, comrades and lovers. As Veena Das (2007) has argued, ideals do not transcend the world of everyday relations and experiences: they rather emerge through and as part of them. Furthermore, as Mathijs Pelkmans has also argued, abstract commitments can have a deeply affective dimension; as he puts it, ‘we can be moved by our principles’ (2017). The commitments for which we might take a stand can be deeply personal in a profound sense. Foregrounding intimacy therefore helps us to move away from a stark contrast between abstract principles and dense social relationships. It is not that the ties that bind are simply put at risk by grand schemes and ideals, but rather that all schemes and ideas gain meaning and possibility through those ties in the first place.

We might be tempted to understand dissent as an issue of ‘politics’ or ‘ethics’ – a play of power and resistance, or a product of a commitment to ethical virtue and normative principles. The last 30 years of anthropology have produced numerous important insights into ways in which people resist multiple forms of domination (Abu-Lughod 1990; Simpson 2014). In partial contrast, some of the recent work in the anthropology of ethics has pushed back against an understanding of political action as linked to instrumental forms of action, in favour of an emphasis on the

cultivation of ethical selves and judgements (Laidlaw 2002; Mattingly 2014). But using the frame of intimacy helps to show that both an ‘ethical virtue’ and ‘power and resistance’ approach to dissent can be too reductionist, failing to grasp the dense and often contradictory bonds within which people live alongside one another, the grounds upon which they protest and the implications of doing so.

It is not that ‘ethics’ and ‘politics’, or even ‘kinship’, do not matter – they matter intensely – but rather that our hopes, fears and relationships cannot be neatly constrained within these frames. Our intimate ties cut across these domains, even as they might sometimes push them apart. The forms of dissent explored in this volume are not simply stories of great lives lived alone or family melodramas, nor are they simply lives of high principle or intense calculation, but all and neither at the same time. Commitments are lived and struggled with in a way that is not reducible to something called politics, ethics or kinship, but through a shifting, fraught and sometimes inspiring combination of multiple forms of always intimate obligation and attachment.

Domains of dissent

In his monumental account of the early years of the Soviet Union, Yuri Slezkine (2017, 334–5) cites at some length an architectural vision of the proposed social relations of the new society that was coming into existence. The new men and women of the Soviet era would be housed in vast collective blocks. On entering the block, they would first pass through an area dedicated to personal hygiene and cleanliness before entering the zone of sociality and the collective ‘American-style’ cafeteria, where all were to eat. Finally, past all this, residents would have access to their strictly individual sleeping rooms. Sex, reproduction and the responsibilities of parenthood were all epiphenomenal to the vision of a new order. This would be a regime in which intimacy would to a great extent be rendered architecturally unthinkable.

The story of Slezkine’s book, though, is of the Soviet failure to remake intimate relations on rational, socialist lines, as orthodox Marxist expectations about the imminent end of the bourgeois family came up against what we might, in retrospect, see as the intransigence of the intimate. ‘The Bolsheviks’ early attempts to reform the family,’ Slezkine concludes, ‘were soon abandoned in favour of an acceptance that remained untheorized and apparently irrelevant to the building of Communism’ (2017, 953).

But intimacy can present an opportunity as well as a challenge for would-be revolutionaries. Alpa Shah (2013), for example, argues against attempts to explain local support for Indian Naxalites in terms of purely material factors (so-called ‘greed or grievance’), in favour of an explanation which attends more closely to the idioms of intimacy that draw in, and hold onto, the loyalties of the rural poor. Young recruits to the Maoists are at once attracted by the familiarity of the cadres they join – brothers, sisters, cousins – while also seeking to escape the impossibility of their own domestic circumstances, the overbearing father, the threat of an unwanted marriage. Intimacy, this case reminds us, cuts two ways, promising warmth and solidarity, but as often delivering conflict and division. And the blurring of the boundary between the intimate and the political is, of course, one source of the peculiarly bitter dynamics of local-level civil wars. In such conflicts accusations of treachery and betrayal are most often hurled at those who would otherwise appear to be close, sometimes resulting in the most intense forms of violence (Kalyvas 2006; Thiranagama and Kelly 2010).

These two examples, read together, show that the politics of intimacy are unlikely to be simple or straightforward. For would-be revolutionaries, captivated by top-down, totalising visions of social and political change, the intimate, as a bounded enclave in social life, threatens to undermine the integrity of the big vision. But, at the same time, the sentimental intimate, the promised warmth of comradeship, of brotherhood and sisterhood, offers the possibility of scaling up into bigger forms of solidarity. They also show that the intimate has been a source of potential dissonance for radical political projects well before the 1960s reminder that ‘the personal is political’. As Hanisch put it, in a classic second-wave feminist intervention, ‘Personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution’ (1970). There is a subtle difference in intent here, though, between second-wave feminism and the socialist revolutionary projects described above. The ‘political’ here is less a totalising project, but rather more a pervasive reality, an inescapable dimension of all social relations. This argument finds a familiar academic echo in Foucault’s 1960s and 1970s writings on power. But, as Heberle (2016) shows in a useful recent survey, it was much more widespread as a point of departure across a range of 1960s social movements – anti-war, anti-racist, anti-patriarchy.

What follows from this, as the history of the last 50 years amply attests, is really not at all simple. The invocation of the ‘personal as political’ raises questions of scale, of strategy, of consistency and of

potential compromises and trade-offs. These have become as much practical questions for those who would act politically as they are theoretical questions for those who would simply analyse. In part this is because the intimate plays tricks on us all: intimacy is the zone in which individual lives should take their proper shape, yet intimacy is precisely the area where we seem to have least control over the shape our lives take (Berlant 1998). The expectation of stability in intimate relations is inseparable from the experience of instability. The desire to bound off the intimate from the unruliness of the wider world is at odds with the weakness of the boundary itself.

But boundaries matter, even – or especially – blurred boundaries. We should be careful lest we collapse intimacy, kinship and politics, or the public and the private for that matter, into one another too quickly. Rather we need to pay attention to their productive points of tension. At one level, intimacy within a family, even if chosen (Weston 1997), can be very different from intimacy within an orchestra or within a political demonstration. Not all intimacy is the same. At another level, intimacy does not exhaust all social relations, and there is more to life than feeling intimate. Intimacy has its own qualities too; it cannot be reduced simply to politics or the social. In the recent anthropology of activism, questions of class, sexuality and gender have been given important analytical weight (Dave 2012; Howe 2013), but activists have also sometimes been analysed as if they are political, and only political, all the way down.

There is a lesson to be learned here from the anthropology of Islam and Christianity, which has also occasionally treated people as if a description of their self-consciously religious life projects can meaningfully ignore their other cross-cutting and sometimes contradictory aspirations, obligations and commitments, as well as the inevitable tensions and failures involved in this process. As Schielke (2015; cf. Mahmood 2004) has reminded us, people are always caught between conflicting and contradictory political, ethical and social projects. In a similar vein, in the anthropology of politics, everything has sometimes been treated as political. As a result the idea of the political easily becomes conceptually, culturally and sociologically flat, with nothing to push off against (Candea 2011; Curtis and Spencer 2012).

The intimate dimensions of dissent therefore do not necessarily crowd out all others, but can exist in parallel, or in tension, with the possibility of changing both, folding and unfolding into one another (Das 2007). Unbounded intimacy, like the relentless politicisation of everything, can sound attractive as an abstract project, even if it is

impossible to achieve in practice. Indeed, it is often the very relationship between the intimate and the political that is at stake in acts of dissent.

Rather than simply doing away with the distinction between kinship and politics, the public and the private or intimacy and its others, we need to understand how these distinctions are produced and contested, valorised and denigrated in particular contexts, and how these processes in turn give shape and meanings to both intimacy and dissent. *The Intimate Life of Dissent* therefore pays particular attention to the ways in which the meanings and implications of dissent are formed specifically through the contingent relationship between the 'political' and its counters.

Many of the political projects described in this volume involve an attempt to collapse the distinctions between the intimate and the political, in the face of sometimes considerable resistance, in order to create the grounds of dissent. These are projects which try to produce a unitary life world, where the personal is the political, sometimes from the top down and sometimes from the bottom up. And it is here that many of the key tensions described in the volume can be found, as the ties that bind pull in different directions. The allure of consistency, from top to toe, rubs up against multiple responsibilities and relationships, both intimate and otherwise, within which people live their lives. The result is friction. Some forms of dissent are about expanding the intimate and some are about bounding it, but either way there is a sense of concomitant danger.

In [chapter 4](#) Serra Hakyemez describes how Kurdish activists, imprisoned and tortured by the Turkish state, develop forms of intimacy, caught as they are between class and kin and grounded in their shared experiences of suffering. The Turkish prison regime imposes a programme of violence, and the Kurdish movement's prison organisation seeks to produce its own revolutionary subjects through a counter-programme of education and bodily discipline. The moment a person steps inside a prison, the Kurdish prison committee introduces him or her to the communal life of political prisoners designed to turn newcomers into a loyal *heval* (comrade), thereby eradicating any private sense of self. But the Kurdish term *heval* implies both comrade *and* friend. It is therefore a source of possible tension, at once speaking to the possibility of revolutionary politics while also implicitly acknowledging its limits.

Hakyemez describes the unease caused when one prisoner asked the court not to disclose the tapped private conversations he had with his 'social friend' in the presence of his 'political friends' – the implication being that he has an intimate relationship with the former that extends beyond the comradeship among the latter. In this seemingly small

gesture, the very relationship between the political and the social is at stake.

The new men and women of revolutionary socialist politics, for whom private life is supposedly eradicated in the name of class solidarity, provide numerous examples of the attempt to collapse the intimate and the political. The early Soviet state's attempted eradication of the nuclear family represents one of the greatest failures of the Soviet political project (Slezkine 2017). In [chapter 2](#) Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic describes the Soviet regime's persistent attempts to impose a regime of top-down intimacy: the singular intimacy of 'we', the Soviet people. The people and the state of the USSR were said to exist in a seamless, singular and unified whole, an inescapable oneness.

Importantly, the language of totality was evoked both by the regime and its opponents. For critics, the totality of the Soviet state was the brutality of the totalitarian. But, as Oustinova-Stjepanovic explains, this created a conundrum for dissidents. If the Soviet state was a totality, there was no exterior space the dissidents could claim from which to resist and oppose. Their response was instead a form of estrangement from the state, an attempt to create a moral 'outside' that was most obviously found in non-instrumental forms of artistic expression and dense social relationships. In this case the meanings and possibilities of dissent are produced through struggles over the meanings of the intimate.

The intimate politics of dissent

How does intimacy shape the forms of dissent? In much political theory there has been a distinct analytical severing of the intimate from the political. Most obviously, Hannah Arendt sought to draw a sharp distinction between the personal and intimate ties of the household and the public life of politics (1958). Indeed, her definition of politics was expressly based on the very distinction between the intimate and the public. This is a distinction that also runs through much liberal politics, where intimate ties are often seen as somehow polluting political commitments and attempts are sometimes made to protect the private lives of politicians from public glare.

More recent work has sought to examine the ways in which disruptive forms of politics might emerge out of intimate life. Giorgio Agamben, for example, has argued that intimate practices help to bring 'the political out of concealment' (Bordeleau 2017, 482). For Agamben, acts of dissent bring an otherwise inchoate politics into view by putting

the self and its relations with others at stake (Bordeleau 2017, 490). Intimacy here provides the grounds and affective labour necessary for political action. As Saidiya Hartman argues, intimacy can be the ‘insurgent ground that enables new possibilities’, rooted in the affective labour central to political action (2019, 227). Indeed, one of the greatest predictors of whether someone will participate in an act of dissent is whether they know someone closely who is already involved (McAdam 1988). It is not simply that private and intimate convictions are taken out into the public realm, but that intimacy itself is generative of political positions and relationships.

What is needed is a more nuanced sense of both intimacy and the possibilities of political disruption. As Serra Hakyemez describes in [chapter 4](#), it is the intimacy created by the shared experience of torture by the Turkish state that creates the possibility of political solidarity within the prison. Hakyemez draws on another part of the work of Hannah Arendt in arguing that relationships formed through witnessing mutual suffering create the grounds for ‘being together’ and therefore acting politically. She develops Arendt’s analogy of oases, ‘those fields of life which exist independently, or largely so, from political conditions’ (Arendt 2005, 202). In this analogy the ‘political conditions’ are the desert of the totalitarian; the oasis represents a space that escapes such a totalising project, or escapes it just sufficiently to allow a flicker of passion and creativity to kindle and burn. As Arendt argues, we may act together ‘in the inherently worldless relationship between human beings as it exists in love and sometimes in friendship – when one heart reaches out directly to the others, as in friendship, or when the in-between, the world, goes up on flames, as in love’ (Arendt 2005, 202). These spaces, and the intimacy that animates them, are not the spaces of compulsory comradeship imposed by the movement’s programme of prison discipline. To tease out what they are, Hakyemez makes a detour into the etymology of local idioms of the intimate and the significance of the ‘private space’ and the ‘forbidden’ in creating the grounds for other possibilities – which in turn challenge the iron logic of the totalitarian version of the political.

Not only can dissent grow out of intimate ties, but it can also produce its own new ties of intimacy. Elsewhere Dave, for example, has shown how queer activism in India forges new relationships (2012, 64). These ties are seldom simple, however. In [chapter 5](#) Amarasuriya and Spencer’s account of the life of one Sri Lankan radical, Joe Seneviratne, starts with a father dramatically giving away his errant son’s dinner to the dog, with dramatic results: ‘I said, my house is not here, but the whole

world, and I left home'. First the party, then particular comrades pick Joe up and find him work, food and shelter. Intimacy is a constant theme in the account of his life that Joe composes in his conversations with Amarasuriya. In this he describes turning his back on home and family, placing his trust in comrades (and the bitter lessons of betrayal) and experiencing the impossible tug between obligations to wife and children and the demands of the party.

Clearly, some forms of dissent can exist in tension with intimate ties. For Michel Foucault, for example, what he calls *parrhesia* (fearless speech) is not simply controversial speech for the sake of speech, but also involves the speaker knowing that it might put their relationships at risk (2001). Dissent *is* dissent here, precisely because it puts our most precious ties at stake. Not only do acts of dissent put intimate ties under strain, however. On the one hand, the burdens and implications of dissent are often borne most intensely by those to whom the dissenter is personally close. On the other hand, the very rupturing and severing of personal relations is the enabling condition of dissent; for those involved in forms of dissent, family and friends become neglected and barely visible. There is considerable evidence to suggest that people with fewer family ties (however those may be measured) are more likely to participate in more radical actions, and limiting obligation to people outside a movement is a key indicator of longevity within it (Whittier 1995). But as Amarasuriya and Spencer point out, breaking ties is not confined to intimate relations: splits, ruptures and breaks are part of the long history of oppositional politics in all parts of the world. There is scope for thinking about the move from personal splits to bigger political splits and back again, and for considering what might happen to the affective consequences of breaks and ruptures with the shift in scale.

Dissent can also be straightforwardly socially corrosive, working against intimate relations. In [chapter 6](#) Tobias Kelly describes how, in mid-twentieth century Britain, conscience was both valorised as an authentic ground of moral autonomy and at the same time suspected as a form of vanity and delusion. His chapter focuses on conscientious objectors to military service in the Second World War. He describes the resolute convictions of the tens of thousands of peace activists who refused conscription and the fight against fascism. As long as they were willing to do alternative forms of service, such as humanitarian work patching up the wounded, they were widely tolerated, often even respected, by the British public for sticking to their principles. A small minority refused to take any direction from the state, however, and many of these ended up in jail.

Although many conscientious objectors came to the decision not to fight as part of intense conversations and experiences with friends, comrades and lovers, the eventual decision to refuse to fight could also be very lonely and full of doubt. Certainly some conscientious objectors were accused of being anti-social, self-obsessed and self-indulgent. As Susan Sontag has argued elsewhere, the moral heroes of our 'liberal civilization' are often regarded with a 'mixture of revulsion, pity and reverence' (1963). The occlusion of kinship ties and disregard of intimate backgrounds is sometimes seen as a mythical source of 'Western' creativity in the sense of the capacity to move, explore, conquer and think freely (Bashkow 2006). But such freedom comes at a cost. Dissent, particularly in its most liberal forms, walks a tight line between moral virtue and arrogant pride.

Intimacy can also work across political lines: you are not only intimate with your political allies. An understanding of politics as rooted in the distinction between friends and enemies (Schmitt 2007) is upended by an examination of the dense relationships that can exist across political lines, where a combination of proximity and difference can transform social relations. As Leela Gandhi argues, friendships can produce dissident solidarities that cut through the exclusionary logics of many forms of politics (2006). There are numerous examples of how, for example, returnees from Soviet prison camps, rejected by families, then became friends and drinking buddies with the guards whom they had despised in their confinement. As Sidharthan Maunaguru describes in [chapter 7](#), political intimacy can traverse the institutional distinction between friends and foes (see also Klumbytè 2011). Maunaguru asks whether it is possible to be a friend and a political rival, and explores the struggle to maintain friendship in the face of political violence.

[Chapter 7](#) focuses on the example of Ranjan, a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee and exile now living in the UK. Ranjan was an early member of PLOTE, a radical leftist Tamil group that emerged in the 1970s. However, he soon fell out with the leadership, which he denounced for its promotion of what he saw as an undemocratic cult of personality. The result was an assassination attempt and threats on Ranjan's life, as he moved from a position of political affinity to one marked by accusations of treachery and eventually enmity. Ranjan finally made his way to the UK, where he worked as a street sweeper and cleaner and tried to support his fellow Sri Lankan exiles in whatever way he could. At one point he helped another former member of PLOTE, who had once followed the orders of the leadership and tried to kill him. Ranjan remained deeply critical of his friend's political views, but believed that

an ethical commitment to democratic politics meant that, in the midst of the splintering violence of Sri Lankan and Tamil politics, he was obliged to maintain friendships across political lines. We are a world away here from the Schmittian definition of politics. If for Schmitt (2007) it is the distinction between friend and enemy that forms the basis of politics, for people such as Ranjan an ethical politics must work to erode that very distinction.

We should not inevitably associate either dissent or intimacy with positive virtues. As Berlant (1998, 286) drily observes, intimacy ‘only rarely makes sense of things’. For its part, intimacy may be disruptive or dissonant, but it can be coercive too (Sa’ar 2001; Strange 2018). The inequalities and forms of violence that mark intimate relations can also run through public acts of dissent, as the act of taking a stand can be inflected by the same hierarchies of gender, class and race that shape intimate ties. Intimacy can also be stifling or claustrophobic. It is not just a resource for dissent, but can also be the very thing people wish to dissent against, particularly in the context of gendered forms of inequality. Intimacy certainly has its ‘dark sides’ (Geschiere 1997; Jamieson 1998; Klein 1967), creating vulnerability, coercion and anxiety as much as care and support. Or, to put this another way, intimacy can be marked by fear and suspicion as much as trust and comfort.

Dissent itself can also be very conventional. As dissent draws people into particular and perhaps new forms of intimacy, it also creates its own norms and ties. Dissent is therefore not a simple synonym for subversion; it creates attachments of its own and can morph into loyalty and conformity to its own principles. Dissent can be deeply orthodox and conformist, a privilege even. At some point dissent stops being itself, giving way to other solidarities and alliances. Furthermore, importantly, dissent from one perspective can look like compliance from another. But if intimacy is associated with affinity and closeness, dissent might imply disagreement and discord. There is therefore a potential paradox at the heart of dissent, in that it both brings people together and pushes them apart.

We are left with a set of questions about the ways in which acts of dissent might be disruptive of, or simply a way to reproduce, existing social relations. Is dissent a social anomaly, and a break from the ordinary flux and flow of life? Or is it rather something to be understood as itself forming social and political relations? How do intimate relations both work against and produce the conditions of dissent? Do particular types of intimacy encourage people to take a stand? Do they indeed shape such acts, and when do they act as a break or an impediment?

In [chapter 8](#) Carole McGranahan shows how dissent both works within and against normative frames, subtly and not so subtly working along and against the grain of convention. [Chapter 8](#) describes how over the course of the twentieth century the Pangdatsang family from eastern Tibet rose from being traders far away from the centres of power to intimates of the Dalai Lama. They achieved this through strategic acts of both subversion and loyalty, both playing by the rules and breaking them, in a situation where power was supposed to be reserved for the central Tibetan aristocracy. This is a family who included anti-colonial politicians, Buddhist loyalists and Communist Party officials. But the family's very presence in Lhasa was itself a form of dissent from aristocratic hierarchy, enabled by submission and acquiescence. For McGranahan, the dissent of this family was always entangled within wider webs of obligation, and it is these entanglements that make dissent so dangerous. An act of opposition is also an act of loyalty and, perhaps most importantly, an act of loyalty can also be seen as an act of opposition.

Socialities of dissent

How do we know dissent when we see it? Dissent is always embedded in dense webs of cultural meaning and social relationships. Different types of sociality therefore produce different forms of both intimacy and dissent. Dissent does not always have to involve taking to the streets, but it always involves some attempt at communication, however small or unclear the intended audience. Dissent must therefore be located in relationships, rather than in individual moments of intentionality. It can be aimed at getting things done, to bring about change, or it can be understood as an end in itself. Even if it is only aimed at the self, however, it also involves making otherwise intangible commitments somehow more concrete. There are therefore important questions about the types of claim – and the types of action – that are seen as dissenting, both by dissenters themselves and by others, and about which claims and which actions are seen as legitimate and significant. Most significantly, how is dissent made tangible or visible?

In [chapter 3](#) Erica Weiss compares what she calls the liberal and secular dissent of conscientious objectors to military service as she explores the dissent of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women peace activists. For liberal peace activists, dissent is grounded in an individual will that stands above narrow calculation, and there is a wider public celebration

of such forms of disruption. As the saying goes, 'We might not agree with what you are saying, but we respect your right to say it'. In contrast, for ultra-Orthodox Jewish peace activists, there are plenty of differences of opinion, but iconoclasm has little aesthetic or moral appeal and there is an emphasis on finding internal consensus, especially before speaking beyond the ultra-Orthodox community. Compromise here is not seen as morally corrosive but as morally virtuous; moral authority is not thought to lie in the individual, but is instead collective and hierarchically organised.

There are very different moral grammars and aesthetic judgements at work in this comparison. As Weiss argues, we need to be careful not to fall into the trap where we analytically identify dissent with particular 'rhetorics, aesthetics and structures' that reflect narrow 'assumptions about moral decision-making' and the 'ethics of self-presentation'. For Weiss, the media and public discourse tend to celebrate liberal, secular forms of dissent, but often miss the subtler, backstage, community-focused forms of dissent found among ultra-Orthodox Jews. One of the key points to take from [chapter 3](#) is that we need to pay attention to modes of dissent that are differentially recognised as appropriate in different contexts. Perhaps counter-intuitively, dissent has its own conventions.

The mediums through which dissent is communicated and given meaning are central to the ways in which it is understood and given meaning. For Foucault (2001), for example, speech, in the form of *par-rhesia*, is central to dissent: dissent is a linguistic activity that involves *speaking* truth. But texts can also have a particularly significant role to play here: the very acts of reading and writing can play a specific role in mediating dissent (Cody 2013). Dissidents are famous as much for what they write as for what they say, and writers have a particularly prominent role in the public imagination of dissent. If texts hold a privileged place in the communication of dissent, reading and writing are also about more than communication. They can also be central to the intimate grounds of dissent. At one level both reading and writing, in their different ways, are deeply personal experiences, potentially reproducing particular forms of interiority. Yet at another level reading and writing are also deeply shared experiences. Not only is writing, in most of its forms, about communicating with others, but reading and writing can play an important role in the imagination of collective forms of life. As Sidharthan Maunaguru and Tobias Kelly both describe, in [chapters 7](#) and [6](#) respectively, the acts of reading and writing play a central role in the sociality of political activists, be this in contemporary Sri Lanka or Britain

during the Second World War. Far from being a solitary act, reading and writing are intensely social, drawing people into dense political relationships.

In [chapter 9](#) Doreen Lee describes how political prisoners and student dissidents in 1990s Indonesia engaged in the writing and circulation of texts, often with the help of their family, friends and strangers. She describes the joy of two former activists on meeting one another after many years, their memories focused less on shared ideals and commitments and more on the shared sensuous work of grappling with photocopies and duplicators to produce political leaflets and posters. While the production of such texts gave ideas a tangible material form in ink and paper, and the evidence of dissent was often to be found in such papers, the processes of production were as important for dissident students as the actual words on the page.

As Lee argues, an analytical focus on the intimate world of paper can help us to understand those ties that bind political activists, away from ‘ideological propulsion’ or the ‘overwhelming force of protest’. For Lee, the apparently ordinary but intimate and shared labour of running the printing machine helped to conscript people into political activities that stretched across space and time. This production of the paper artefacts of dissent was a craft that revealed new political forms (Lee 2016, 30). Often read in secrecy, dissident texts changed hands, entering and transforming social, political and interpersonal relations. New publics and new political relationships were called into being through the production of words on the page.

Questions of recognition and misrecognition are central to the process of dissent. And recognition can itself be a form of privilege. In hierarchical settings the right to be heard is if anything more important than the right to speak (Burghart 1996). Not all forms of dissent are recognised as such, and not all forms of dissent are deemed politically legitimate. As McGranahan shows in [chapter 8](#), the everyday details of a life can be read by the state as mundane or subversive, depending on the frame within which they are placed. If dissent is an issue of interpretation, rather than being an innate quality of an act, it is often therefore deeply ambiguous, containing both forms of protest and loyalty that can be read in different ways by different audiences.

In what might be called the liberal imagination, dissent is foundational for both a particular type of citizenship and for moral personhood (Kelly 2015). To dissent is to show the capacity for ethical reflection and autonomy: dissent is therefore both a moral and political virtue. As Erica Weiss reveals, for example, Israeli conscientious objectors work

with a moral vocabulary that valorises the capacity for ethical freedom. Yet at the same time firm boundaries are placed around how people can dissent and in what ways, and around what is said to ‘count’ as an authorised form of dissent. Not all issues are dealt with equally as issues of conscience, and not all people can equally persuade others that their conscience is genuine. As Kelly has described elsewhere, for example (2015), not all forms of opposition to war are given the same weight within liberal democracies. To be persuasive, conscience often has to be tempered and individual, and claims of conscience are often most persuasively made by those deemed to be loyal citizens.

We might see the recognition of dissent as diagnostic of particular social formations, in the sense that what is understood as an act of dissent can help us understand what aspects of social relations are understood as significant and important for social reproduction (Abu-Lughod 1990). Audiences for dissent can take many forms and, rather than being unified, should be understood as varied and hierarchical (Warner 2002). We might also ask who is watching, who is noticing and who cares? What happens when no one takes any notice? And what happens when an audience attributes meanings that were not intended by their authors? Seemingly innocent acts can be labelled as radical, and acts designed to be disruptive might be ignored.

In [chapter 2](#) Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic describes how acts of seeming political dissidence were reframed by the Soviet state as evidence of mental health problems, as delusions and mental pathology that could be treated therapeutically. However, she also questions why the Soviet state seemed to care so much. Why did it go out of its way to respond to criticisms of the state that were commonplace, and even aired by people at the centre of the regime? Her answer is that it was not so much *what* was said that was at stake, but *how* it was said, and where. Dissidents tried to create an artistic and moral space that was somehow ‘outside’ the Soviet state. Through their estrangement they challenged the state’s very claim to totality. Dissent matters here, precisely because it was so seemingly inconsequential.

Taken together, the chapters in *The Intimate Life of Dissent* – ranging across Israel, Turkey, Indonesia, Tibet, Britain, Sri Lanka and Russia – examine the conditions under which people take a stand on issues of principle, at great potential risk to themselves. British conscientious objectors refuse to take up arms, Indonesian students print political pamphlets, Kurdish prisoners maintain tight bonds of loyalty in the face of a deracinating prison environment, ultra-Orthodox Jewish Israelis meet with Palestinian Muslim women, Soviet dissidents struggle

to maintain a social and moral space outside the suffocating embrace of the Soviet state, Tibetan politicians work against aristocratic forms of hierarchy and Sri Lankan activists push against ethnic and political divisions. These acts are both small-scale and grand, but they involve a commitment to principles, however ambiguous, in the face of intense pressure and at great risk. And these are forms of dissent that reverberate through the most intimate aspects of their lives, running up against and through the ties that bind them to others. It is not simply that the ties are put at risk by a commitment to high ideals. Rather these ideals gain meaning and possibility through these most intimate relationships. Intimacy marks both the possibility and the limit of dissent.

Acknowledgements

The writing of this introduction was made possible through the support of an ERC Horizon 2020 Consolidator Grant (648477 AnCon ERC-2014-CoG). We would particularly like to thank Doreen Lee and Serra Hakyemez for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1990. 'The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women', *American Ethnologist* 17 (1): 41–55.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1972. *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Arendt, Hannah. 2005. *The Promise of Politics*, edited by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Bashkow, Ira. 2006. *The Meaning of Whitemen: Race and Modernity in Orokaiva Cultural World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berlant, Lauren. 1998. 'Intimacy: A Special Issue', *Critical Inquiry* 24 (2): 281–88.
- Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. 1998. 'Sex in Public', *Critical Inquiry* 24 (2): 547–66.
- Bordeleau, Erik. 2017. 'Initiating Life: Agamben and the Political Use of Intimacy', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31 (3): 481–92.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2010. *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burghart, Richard. 1996. *The Conditions of Listening: Essays on Religion, History and Politics in South Asia*, edited by C.J. Fuller and Jonathan Spencer. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Candea, Matei. 2011. "'Our Division of the Universe": Making a Space for the Non-Political in the Anthropology of Politics', *Current Anthropology* 52 (3): 309–34.
- Cody, Francis. 2013. *The Light of Knowledge: Literacy Activism and the Politics of Writing in South India*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Curtis, Jennifer and Jonathan Spencer. 2012. 'Anthropology and the Political'. In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Anthropology, Volume 1*, edited by Richard Fardon, Olivia Harris, Trevor H.J. Marchand, Mark Nuttall, Cris Shore, Veronica Strang and Richard A. Wilson, 168–82. London: SAGE Publications.
- Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dave, Naisargi N. 2012. *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Foucault, Michel. 2001. *Fearless Speech*, edited by Joseph Pearson. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Gandhi, Leela. 2006. *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1968. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Geschiere, Peter. 1997. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, translated by Peter Geschiere and Janet Roitman. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Hanisch, Carol. 1970. 'The Personal is Political'. In *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*, 76–8. New York: Radical Feminism.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2019. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. London: Serpent's Tail.
- Havel, Václav. 1989. *Living in Truth*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Heberle, Renee. 2016. 'The Personal is Political'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, 593–609. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 2005. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Howe, Cymene. 2013. *Intimate Activism: The Struggle for Sexual Rights in Postrevolutionary Nicaragua*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jamieson, Lynn. 1998. *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kalyvas, Stathis N. 2006. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kelly, Tobias. 2015. 'Citizenship, Cowardice, and Freedom of Conscience: British Pacifists in the Second World War', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57 (3): 694–722.
- Klein, Melanie. 1967. 'Love, Guilt and Reparation'. In *Love, Hate and Reparation*, by Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere, 57–91. London: Hogarth Press.
- Klumbytė, Neringa. 2011. 'Political Intimacy: Power, Laughter, and Coexistence in Late Soviet Lithuania', *East European Politics and Societies* 25 (4): 658–77.
- Laidlaw, James. 2002. 'For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8 (2): 311–32.
- Laurie, Timothy and Hannah Stark. 2017. 'Love's Lessons: Intimacy, Pedagogy and Political Community', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 22 (4): 69–79.
- Lee, Doreen. 2016. *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McAdam, Doug. 1988. *Freedom Summer*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGranahan, Carole. 2016. 'Theorizing Refusal: An Introduction', *Cultural Anthropology* 31 (3): 319–25.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2004. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mattingly, Cheryl. 2014. *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Pelkmans, Mathijs. 2017. *Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Rawls, John. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sa'ar, Amalia. 2001. 'Lonely in Your Firm Grip: Women in Israeli-Palestinian Families', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7 (4): 723–39.
- Schiellke, Samuli. 2015. *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Schmitt, Carl. 2007. *The Concept of the Political*, translated by George Schwab. Expanded ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shah, Alpa. 2013. 'The Intimacy of Insurgency: Beyond Coercion, Greed or Grievance in Maoist India', *Economy and Society* 42 (3): 480–506.
- Shelby, Tommie. 2018. *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Simpson, Audra. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Slezkine, Yuri. 2017. *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 1963. 'Simone Weil', *New York Review of Books*, 1 February. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1963/02/01/simone-weil/>.

- Strange, Stuart Earle. 2018. "‘It’s Your Family That Kills You’: Responsibility, Evidence, and Misfortune in the Making of Ndyuka History", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60 (3): 629–58.
- Thiranagama, Sharika and Tobias Kelly. 2010. *Traitors: Suspicion, Intimacy, and the Ethics of State-Building*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Toscano, Alberto. 2010. *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea*. London: Verso.
- Walzer, Michael. 1970. *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Warner, Michael. 2002. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.
- Weiss, Erica. 2016. 'Refusal as Act, Refusal as Abstention', *Cultural Anthropology* 31 (3): 351–8.
- Weston, Kath. 1997. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Whittier, Nancy. 1995. *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women’s Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Yakir, Pyotr. 1972. *A Childhood in Prison*. London: Macmillan.