The dark side of intimacy

— Alex Lambert

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The eros for an intimate retrotopia

In his classic interpretation of the Stranger in postmodern cities, Zygmunt Bauman (1995) articulates the foremost contradiction of our times. The Stranger is 'Janus Faced'. One face is a spectacle of seductive difference: exciting, mysterious, promiscuous. The other is a threat to one's community and identity: unknown, ominous, menacing. Drawing on a range of thinkers, Bauman locates the Stranger at the locus of the *flâneur*'s gaze. Here the Stranger is the object of a photograph, a snapshot that peers at surfaces without disclosing depths. It makes no demand for ethical treatment, no demand for any kind of loyalty that compromises the capricious freedom of the wanderer. Moreover, when it adopts its uglier face, one feels one's own freedom in jeopardy. There is an urgent desire to withdraw into the safety of the intimate home, to be protected and nourished by familiar, caring others.

In this drama, the dense, dynamic and multicultural reality of the city is a social fact. The signification of difference is palpably proximate and runs hot through the medial veins of urban life. Yet this difference is also socially distant, clotting in networks that are connected yet uncommunicative. If the Stranger cannot become a friend, what is multiculturalism but yet another form of segregation and tacit racism?

In his final book, *Retrotopia*, Bauman's (2017) diagnosis of sociality is even more pessimistic. Populations perceive the failure of nation-states to secure a prosperous global society. There is a deepening fear of the Stranger in an increasingly risky and migratory world. The future no longer looks prosperous, even though Enlightenment prophets always promised it would be. Finally, the erosion of social bonds that critics of modernity are familiar with have

become all too palpable for most people. Hence futurity has been abandoned for nostalgia. A desire to return into the reassuring intimacy of the metaphorical womb plays out as a yearning for a community with a strong shared identity and an intolerance of the Other. Witness the renewed struggle of indigenous communities against the potent legacy of colonial exclusion. Witness the prominent return of nationalism in Europe and America. Witness Brexit and the ascendancy of Trump. Watch as the 'clash of civilisations' reappears at the media feeding trough with a newfound hunger. If there was ever a death knell for the idea of cosmopolitanism, it is the eros for an intimate retrotopia.

This situation encourages an opposition between intimacy and cosmopolitanism. Yet the realities of conflict across the globe at both micro and macro scales also encourages us to question the possibility of a cosmopolitan politics. Within this framework, two issues relating to intimacy emerge that are often cautiously avoided. First, if intimacy is that which excludes the Stranger and perhaps desires his or her absolute annihilation, then intimacy has a dark side that is rarely discussed in its full significance. The dialectical ethics of intimacy must be invited to the centre of the political debate. Second, the dialectical character of intimacy and cosmopolitanism must be clarified to understand this problem in more depth. We can only hope that this will begin to disclose alternative ways of being together. Evidently this is an ethical and political problem, the characteristics of which I explore below. It is also a metaphysical problem, as it concerns whether intimacy and cosmopolitanism have essential qualities or forms.

In this paper, I tease out these issues, arguing that both intimacy and cosmopolitanism exist. Intimacy can be non-allergenic, and often welcomes difference, replenishing itself by drinking from the inexhaustible mystery of the Stranger. Yet this is not a guarantee. In fact, there will often be moments where the intimate and the non-intimate remain at

odds. In order to understand this, the concepts 'intimacy' and 'cosmopolitanism' must be deconstructed. They can no longer stand in the form they have been popularly cast in.

Intimacy and the Good

As Sara Ahmed (2010) argues, intimacy is often unequivocally associated with happiness and the good life. This is particularly evident in my research field, digital media, where a surfeit of studies have gone searching for intimacy online. These studies either demonise online media for obliterating intimacy, or celebrate the ways people sustain their intimacies despite the tyrannies of distance and mediation. Here intimacy is only considered problematic in its *lack* or in its deviation from some *norm*. Scholars are concerned with the capacity to forge an intimate bond given the nature of a technical medium or culture (Gershon, 2010; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Milne, 2010; Turkle, 2011). They also declare that intimacy has digressed from its sacred qualities — often unstated and hence already dubious — when it is contrasted with online relationships based on deception (Marwick, 2008), narcissism (Bauman, 2007), superficial 'friendships' (Rosen, 2007), ephemeral 'hook ups' (Papp, Danielewicz & Cayemberg, 2011) and pornographic pleasure (Sun, Bridges, Johnson & Ezzell, 2016). Of particular concern is the degradation of intimacy through its mediation as a public object (Illouz, 2007). As I have elsewhere discussed, for those who celebrate the victory of intimacy over media, and for those who decry its destruction, a common assumption is that 'real' intimacy involves establishing a genuine form of social presence (Lambert, 2017b).

Whether intimacy itself is necessary and good is never debated. Authors make this assumption implicitly. It exists in the field of media studies and in many works that investigate modern intimacy more generally. This is not to say that these texts do not expertly diagnose and critique changes in intimacy. Anthony Giddens (1992) famously argues that

intimacy has been democratised, pointing to the acceptance of marginalised intimacies, yet cautioning against new forms of gendered exploitation. Giddens's fellow reflexive modernists, such as Zygmunt Bauman (2003), Ulrich Beck, and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2013), are less optimistic. They argue that the increasingly complex global social order has imbued such contingency and dynamism into personal life that the structural forces that cement relationships have eroded, causing a general turn toward ephemerality and egocentric eroticism.

Lauren Berlant (1997) denounces the transformation of intimacy into a form of political propaganda, a way of coding the authenticity of politicians. Berlant contributes to a popular criticism of the public and commodified nature of intimacy. This can also be found in the work of Eva Illouz (2007), who thoroughly traces the expansion of intimate discourses throughout pop culture, activism, the workplace, and expert systems such as psychotherapy. For Illouz and similar authors, such as Arlie Hochschild (2003), once intimacy is kidnapped by market forces and so-called experts a kind of epistemological crisis emerges. We no longer know what intimacy is. We cannot understand it on our own terms. Its meaning becomes such a psychological issue for us that the everyday practice of intimacy is no longer rewarding. The persistence of this anxiety is, of course, big business for the experts. Their diagnoses are both a product and a weapon.

These authors critique changes in intimacy, but rarely the very concept of intimacy itself. Intimacy's self-justifying value acts as a kind of *ground* that regulates their discursive positions and critical manoeuvres. Why is intimacy able to do this? Why is it so special? If we deconstruct this ground, what can it tell us about ourselves today? Sara Ahmed (2010) aims similar questions at the concept of 'happiness' and its unchallenged association with the 'good', brought to prominence by Aristotle. Just like intimacy, a lack of happiness has been critiqued by philosophers, and different types of happiness

have been considered. Yet the a priori value of happiness is never justified. Happiness is the unquestioned teleology in philosophy, which reads as a vast 'happiness archive'. In reading this archive, as well as the 'unhappy archives' of marginalised groups, Ahmed shows how questioning the value of happiness reveals its socio-political functions. Happiness is performative in that it collects things in the world and makes them 'good', relegating other things to being 'bad'. It sorts people into groups, evaluating them, judging them, and justifying their positions of knowledge and power. Take an extreme case: the slave owner's happiness justifies the slave's subservience.

Intimacy is similar. It is indeed one of the things that is associated with happiness, and for this reason is considered 'good'. But if intimacy is good and non-intimacy is consequently considered bad, how does that relationship play out in concrete social circumstances between intimates and non-intimates? How are those who one considers incapable of being intimate treated? How is intimacy sorting people, evaluating them, judging them, and justifying their positions of knowledge and power? It is this discursive understanding of intimacy as *value and status producing* that reveals its political and ethical potency, as well as its darker side.

Returning to Bauman's *Retrotopia*, discourses of intimacy clearly have power effects on large scales: the local community, the nation, the civilisation. This becomes more evident in modern society due to the complex functional differentiation of the global social system. In simple social systems, intimacy is universal. The system itself is constituted by a kinship network of intimate obligations (Duby, 1988). This is not to say that different tribes or other forms of social collectivity do not encounter each other, only that these encounters with difference become much more complex in a global, highly differentiated system. In today's world, the concept of intimacy thus experiences a kind of scalar crisis. It is either reduced dramatically to small units, such as the

family, or expanded exponentially to describe a particular cultural affinity. For example, Herzfeld's (1997) famous concept of 'cultural intimacy' illustrates how the nation-state adopts a system of representation similar to that of close ties. Intimacy is clearly a multiscalar phenomenon with a morphological capacity. An exploration of intimacy's power effects must therefore preserve the microscopic focus on everyday 'life politics' that the reflexive modernists encourage, while returning to larger scale question of hegemonic cultural formations. I return to this problem later through the work of Peter Sloterdijk, whose morphological model of the intimate sphere begins to provide a solution.

The ambiguity of intimacy

To evaluate the power of the intimate, should we not first ask what intimacy is? Recently, I have tackled this question in a deconstructive manner, touring through a variety of texts that explore intimacy and digital media, and showing that intimacy is often loosely defined (Lambert, 2017b). Moreover, taken together, these definitions are strikingly multiple, polysemous and divergent. Intimacy is predicated with qualities such as presence (Hjorth, Wilken & Gu, 2012; Ito, 2004; Milne, 2010), labour (Gregg, 2011), listening (Crawford, 2009), disclosure (Chambers, 2013), conversation (Turkle, 2015), touch and care (Jamieson, 2013), sexuality (Pertierra, 2006), emotion and affect (Race, 2015), risk and love (Gardner & Davis, 2013), privacy (Rosen, 2007), trust (Gershon, 2010) and memory (Van House & Churchill, 2008). There are culturally specific terms to understand intimate relationships and spaces, such as the Haitian term *lakou* (Horst, 2014), the Tongan term *vā* (Nishitani, 2014), Ngaanyatjarra concepts of familial obligation such as *tjukurrpa* and *yinyurrpa* (Kral, 2014), and the various Asian conceptions of face, such *mianzi* in China, *izzat* in India, *mentsu* in Japan, *chemyon* in Korea, and *nâa* in Thailand (Lim & Basnyat, 2016). There are also phenomenological

concepts of intimacy that focus on the relationship between humans and non-human objects (Bull, 2005; Suchman, 2011).

In these studies, various debates play out around what defines an intimate relationship. Yet, how are we to justify a position in these debates given the fluid qualities of the concept itself? Intimacy's shifting qualities exemplify what Derrida (1976) calls the 'trace' of meaning that orders human experience. Each fixation of a quality encounters an alternative, further definition, revealing the lack of a transcendental signifier that can ground intimacy. Also, intimacy's qualities change in different time periods. Intimacy is thus open to a genealogical deconstruction that locates it within different, historically determined 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1978). This perspective can be used to denature essentialist discourses and hence legitimise marginalised intimacies, such as those associated with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender relationships. There is always an excess of discourse that is not articulated in a particular definition or regime of truth, and hence an excess way of being intimate that has yet to be articulated.

Thus intimacy is *ambiguous*: its qualities have an infinite variety of articulations and interpretations. This poses a significant question. Is ethics possible in such an ambiguous domain? This is one of the fundamental existentialist preoccupations. For example, Simone De Beauvoir (1948) argues that ethics is only conceivable within the context of ambiguity and freedom. Ambiguity is a symptom of the ontological reality that existence precedes essence. It resonates with Sartre's point that man 'is a being who makes himself a lack of being in order that there might be being' (ibid: 8). Put differently, people are faced with an excess of potential ways of living their lives. This discloses the fact that one's own life is contingent, and lacks an essential nature. Embracing this lack means embracing the freedom to become other than what one is. Yet once this freedom is posited, the freedom of others is also made apparent. Ethics is thus primarily a response to the problem of the self's freedom in relation to the other's.

De Beauvoir views the other as a challenge to the self's will to be free, and her solution is that the other's freedom must also be willed. Her concept of freedom is in part Hegelian: it is the fundamental *idea* that must be realised subjectively and historically. The negotiation of wills becomes the dialectical process that gives this idea a concrete existence. Such negotiations are of course cut through with forms of power. De Beauvoir critiques power relations that fail to recognise a person's legitimate will to freedom.

So far everything I have discussed has outlined a logic of the encounter. This plays out between individuals, but also between groups of people who share a history and a sense of identity. The encounter of groups can be theorised ethically, not in terms of the qualities of these groups, but in terms of the *formal* nature of the encountering process. The distinction between intimate and non-intimate is one of abstract dialectical formality. This formality makes possible a contingent variety of concrete articulations. Here I turn to the complex and sometimes controversial philosophy of Peter Sloterdijk, where all the above problematics are on show.

Sphere life and its discontents

Sloterdijk (2011) establishes a metaphysics of forms, focused around the ideal geometry of the sphere. He takes idiosyncratic tours through phenomenology, psychoanalysis, theology, literary analysis, biology, evolutionary theory, and most importantly, historical anthropology. In each of these disciplines, Sloterdijk finds evidence that points toward the primacy of humanity's position within social spheres. Consider his examination of the clay craft of early civilisations. This illustrates the relationship between human society and the logic of the container, of being 'inside'.

In his explanation of the medial structure of spheres, Sloterdijk makes some groundbreaking metaphysical innovations in our understanding of intimacy. In the first volume of his *Spharen* trilogy, he begins by exploring the

characteristics of the primal womb sphere. The womb is a pre-objective and pre-linguistic space of absolute presence, intimacy, and nourishment. Like Bauman, Sloterdijk views the desire to return into a community where one is protected and nourished as a 'homesick yearning' for a return into the womb, and the unmediated relationship with the mother. Importantly, in arguing for the primacy of the womb and the mother-child relationship, Sloterdijk argues that a philosophy of intimacy must precede and undergird a philosophy of politics. Already, then, a philosophy of cosmopolitanism finds its status demurred.

The womb establishes the medial characteristics of spheres, which are capable of scaling in size and morphing in their concrete qualities. Spheres require *animation* from a higher being. This begins in the womb with biological and proto-social animations from the mother. It develops culturally at the level of social groups into spiritual animations from Gods and other supernatural beings. It continues to play out in dyadic power relationships between neurotics and mesmerists, insomniacs and somnambulists, and analysands and psychoanalysts. Animation is ego-forming and empowering. Hence the death of an animator always produces an existential and cultural crisis. Interestingly, the womb sphere illustrates the way in which the animator can be both immanent and transcendent, both constitutive of a sphere, yet somehow able to address it from the outside. Sloterdijk thus attempts to solve a key theological and cosmological paradox by viewing it as a morphological expression of the human prenatal experience.

The womb also establishes the mechanisms by which spheres communicate with, and guard themselves against, that which is outside. Here, communication and security are derived from the same function, *immunisation*. The key immunising agent in the womb is the placenta, which establishes a 'blood communion' with the mother, while protecting the foetus from infection. Like all sphere elements,

the placenta morphs into more sophisticated technical and cultural immune systems. Spheres are 'morpho-immunological constructs' (ibid: 46). For example, I have recently explored how social media filter bubble algorithms immunise intimate groups from broader online social networks (Lambert, 2017a).

There are gender and power relations present in this model, the critique of which can lead to a fully non-essentialist conception of sphere life. Sloterdijk rarely stops to critique the heterosexual family that inflects his characterisation of the womb sphere. Yet feminist critiques have thoroughly denatured the womb, showing it to be a discursive terrain, as well as a space of increasing technical interventions that afford the reproductivity of same sex couples (Lupton, 2013). Nor does Sloterdijk question the patriarchal Christian God, yet it is clear that various religions and beliefs exist. Hence, while the formal relations of animation and immunisation remain important, the quality of the animator or the immune system is in no way fixed. This allows for the ambiguity of intimacy to play out within a non-essentialist spherical formula. Sloterdijk builds on Heidegger's notion of *dasein* as 'being there', but clarifies that this being is always already a 'being with' (*mitsein*). As with Heidegger, we can say that this way of 'being with' is historically contingent. If one abstracts historical circumstances, intimacy can be reduced to the formal logic of being-from-birth and a being-toward-death within a social sphere that has no essential qualities except the capacity for both opening and closing. This is incredibly useful, as it produces a theory of intimacy that does not justify symbolic or real violence between those that practice different ways of being intimate.

Attention must now be focused on the opening and closing of the sphere, for whatever concrete form this takes will influence the nature of conflict or cooperation between spheres. This is fleshed out more through the concept of immunity. The immune system is perhaps one of Sloterdijk's

most evocative yet contradictory concepts. On the one hand, it guarantees safety from threat. Yet Sloterdijk is more than aware that a perfect immune system would equate to a perfectly closed sphere, and hence negate the possibility of social relationships. Hence, Sloterdijk must make room for 'infection'. This is a positive process in that it produces new intimacies and solidarities. His language often pairs an allergic discourse of infection with a non-allergic discourse of 'resonance', 'interfolding', 'intersection', 'eroticism', 'mimesis' and 'telepathy'. This produces a new closeness with a 'foreign life spirit' that is nevertheless somehow familiar: 'present closeness as the repetition of past closeness' (ibid: 222). Therefore, infections occur within an already welcoming and homogeneous terrain. If this logic of intimacy founds a politics, it is a politics that emphasises the growth of spheres based on roughly equivalent similarity, rather than radical difference.

In his books that deal with postmodernity, including the third volume of *Spharen* (Sloterdijk, 2016a), it becomes clear that Sloterdijk does not believe that an intimate sphere can augment itself with radical difference. The postmodern age is a globalised, networked, virtual sea of *foam*: broiling and incoherent spheres that lack grand animators. This spatial crisis produces a complex, technical assemblage of immune systems that fracture previously strong solidarities. This is perhaps best exemplified in the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann (2012), who charts the increasing differentiation of systems of communication as society increases in complexity. This is also an age of mirrors, where individuals find narcissistic comfort in their medial reflections rather than intimate others. The consequences for cosmopolitanism are striking. Traditional cosmological narratives of a global community no longer seem tenable. There is no longer an exterior nor a centre to the world, but a sense that everything is transmitted from everywhere. Increasing communicative speed further catalyses this displacement. Connections become so mobile and ephemeral that they lose their humanity,

becoming an interface between the face and the non-face. Consider dating apps that easily allow a person to be 'swiped right' into oblivion before the complex interplay of recognition can begin.

It is hard to argue with some of these diagnoses. It is Sloterdijk's response to the problem that many find controversial. A pervading 'deanimation' that sucks people of their sense of pride and identity induces a homesick nostalgia for the spheres of the past. Like many other writers, most notably Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), Sloterdijk perceives a yearning for a communal 'immanence'. However, rather than showing the impossibility of such an immanence, as Nancy does, Sloterdijk celebrates extant communities that have managed to find some sense of solidarity. In his interviews, collected together in *Selected Exaggerations*, he explains that the welfare state has produced envy and resentment from a working class that rejects any incentives to better themselves (Sloterdijk, 2016b). He is deeply concerned with the psychosocial health of the wealthy class-sphere, who are punished by taxes, and are disempowered of their capacity to make the free choice to be generous. Self-affirming pride (*thymos*) has become essential to Sloterdijk's conception of virtuous sphere life, and he bemoans welfare's destruction of this characteristic in German culture.

These themes also play out in Sloterdijk's discussions of Islam. As with Bauman, Sloterdijk views the yearning for the womb sphere as articulated through a new clash of civilisations, a world war of monotheisms (ibid: 206). Religious pride has been wounded, transferred into rage, and husbanded by religious institutions and political parties into a deeply pervasive form of resentment. Sloterdijk seems to empathise with political Islam's rage, as he understands it as a sense of superfluousness and deanimation within post-religious global capitalism (ibid: 195). Here he finds some temperance, arguing that Islam must be given political

hospitality and legitimacy in Europe in order to avoid the inevitable consequence of rage: terror and annihilation. Yet this legitimacy is never seen as a union of spheres, but rather an agonistic consensus that different spheres unhappily co-exist without destroying each other. Hence, both through his abstract thought and contemporary commentary, Sloterdijk builds a philosophy of intimacy that seems to negate the possibility of cosmopolitanism. This is concerning, as it suggests withdrawing into and defending one's sphere, rather than attempting to ally and augment spheres together, say, through wealth distribution or multicultural community programs. Sloterdijk invites us directly into the murky waters of intimacy and cosmopolitanism.

The problem of cosmopolitanism

While Diogenes and the Stoics are certainly responsible for some of the founding ideals of European cosmopolitanism, expressed as a kind of universal citizenship or humanity, its dialectic formulation emerged with modern political philosophy. This dialectic is essentially related to *freedom*. Hobbs and Spinoza had already popularised the idea that living under a sovereign rule was a rational movement beyond the state of nature, where individual appetites were barbarously unfettered. This represents an important step from an individual to a collective concept of freedom based on mutually beneficial compromise. In his *Idea for a Universal History From a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, Kant (1957) mobilised dialectics — self and other, nature and reason — within the explicit project of a cosmopolitan global society. Again, the natural interest in survival compels people to rationally cooperate. This is duplicated on the level of interstate cooperation, theoretically producing a league of nations that vouchsafes citizenship for all through an international political system. This dialectical movement and expansion of what could be called 'the political' comes to influence Hegel, and through

him Marx, whose historical archery directed toward a global commune is perhaps the most absolutist of the cosmopolitan utopias.

This leads to some well-known teleological problems, and hardly describes the empirical reality of our complex global system. Let us reframe this in terms of Sloterdijk's central provocation: the dialectical contradiction between the intimate and the non-intimate. If this dialectic necessarily moved toward a moment of perfect synthesis, in which the intimate augments itself with all social difference, then one cannot avoid a teleological model of social evolution toward an impossible point of global intimacy, a rapturous Christian eschatology in which all are immanently bound in the bosom of God. If one wishes to preserve difference, it is justifiable to view this gluttonous expansion of an intimate sphere as a fattened totalitarianism. We must thus forgive Zarathustra for gladly welcoming an age in which the serfdom of belief had reached its twilight.

For a thorough critique of this absolutism, I invite you to consider the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantel Mouffe, particularly their co-written *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). The text deconstructs an absolutist system of history and subjectivity through both a genealogical reading of Marxist theory and a mixture of post-structural thought. The authors begin by charting the work of Marxist theorists such as Luxemburg, Krautsky, Bernstein, Sorel, Plekhanov and Lenin during the Second International, who were desperately trying to resuscitate the *necessity* of revolution in response to a crisis in Marxism. Capitalism seemed stronger than ever, the working class was fragmented, and rather than one single dialectical struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie, there seemed to be a plurality of positions and disagreements. The idea of a unified revolutionary subject, the necessary product of an essential socio-economic law, was slowly breaking down. Marxists were unable to truly account for this until Gramsci, whose concept of hegemony

denied that an economic situation was sufficient for explaining the emergence of a revolutionary movement. In doing so, Gramsci challenged the idea of an essential revolutionary subjectivity based in class struggle.

Laclau and Mouffe go on to develop Gramsci's insights into a thorough conception of hegemony, using post-structuralism to fully tease out the distinction between necessity and contingency. Following Foucault and Althusser, the authors implode the economic, social and political domains into the province of discourse. Discourse is prior to social structure. Both economics and politics are discursive constructs, hence neither is given a transcendental position. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) argues that discourses are composed of statements that cannot be unified to reveal either a conceptual synthesis or an objective thing in the world. Each statement refers to another discourse that is itself plural. For instance, statements about madness refer to discourses of madness that can take on many forms. Discourses are always 'dispersing' and therefore always produce contingency. Laclau and Mouffe go on to conceptualise this contingency in terms of Althusser's (1967) notion of 'overdetermination'. This signifies an excess that evades a determinative system, such as the Marxist dialectic. Hence contingency is not only viewed as that which is possible but not guaranteed, but as the excess domain of difference that escapes a seemingly determinative system. It follows that overdetermination can be understood as a possibility for a surplus of determinations, a surplus of systems that make seemingly rational claims on being total and necessary.

Laclau and Mouffe must grapple with a central problem. In an overdetermined discursive terrain every identity is incomplete and unfixed. But if this is the case, how can one account for what Gramsci calls hegemonic 'historical blocs': the emergence of solidarities that share a history and a sense of identity, and yet must be internally differentiated and dynamic. The authors approach this problem by

establishing the uneasy relationship between 'difference' and 'equivalence'. Human beings are essentially different, yet they are capable of identifying shared experiences based on their historical situations. These are relations of equivalence that allow them to represent an imaginary sense of universality that seems to transcend their particularities. This relation of equivalence is always articulated in a negative way, as a political frontier against another group. It masks individual differences in order to act against this group. It is animated, in Sloterdijk's terms, through its antagonism. Hegemony is just this logic of articulating an illusory equivalence for antagonistic political gains. However, given the diverse subject positions that exist within any hegemonic articulation, there is always the possibility of internal struggle. No articulation ever becomes a fully sutured moment in the progress of history, but rather a 'nodal point' that will inevitably break down and transform. The consequence of this is that there can be no universal humanity in the Kantian political sense. There is always a contingent excess that escapes every totality, and which may eventually create a new hegemonic articulation that opposes whatever political system claims itself to be cosmopolitan.

Rather than abandoning cosmopolitanism, I argue that we need to think about universal humanity in a new way. The seeds of this reconceptualisation are already apparent in Laclau and Mouffe, particularly in their notion of antagonism. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* this is described as an implicit consciousness of the precariousness of one's identity. Antagonism is the denial of this precariousness through the establishing of an 'us' and a 'them'. That is, a solidification of the self through a process of Othering. This recalls Sartre's (2012) concept of bad faith: the moment when one denies the terrifying possibility of being other, and retreats into the safety of one's past and its prejudices. Put differently, it is the rejection of freedom in favour of one's 'facticity', the potent history that doggedly entreats us to be this or that

kind of person. The psychology of bad faith is similar to the logic of collective antagonism.

In her later work, Mouffe (2013) explores the affective dimensions of antagonism. Drawing on Freud, she argues that the libidinal urge of *eros* — eroticism, love, and friendship — knits groups together. *Thanatos* — hate and aggression — inflects antagonistic encounters between intimate groups. Thus Mouffe critiques the liberal democratic idea that social encounters are governed by reason and hence are always capable of consensus building. This discourse cannot account for the affective, antagonistic nature of the political. Antagonism sets the limits of reason, and hence the possibility of a reason-governed universal humanity. It is at this point that Mouffe's concept of hegemony and Sloterdijk's concept of an intimate sphere nearly converge. For in turning to psychoanalysis, Mouffe gives hegemonic articulations a primal eroticism that resembles the logic of the womb-sphere. Also, like Sloterdijk, Mouffe recognises the apocalyptic danger of a politics based on rage. She advocates for the sublimation of antagonism into 'agonism': an agreement between hegemonies to tolerate their radical differences and exist in a state of 'conflictual consensus'.

The practical value of this solution is a multi-polar world or 'pluri-verse'. This seems highly attractive given the devastatingly flawed projects of nation building and so-called democracy spreading that have accompanied recent Western interventions in the Middle East. Here Mouffe diverges from Sloterdijk. She advocates radical plurality, while Sloterdijk insists on a return to dominant monotheisms. Mouffe's position is decidedly more progressive. Yet there is a seeming contradiction in her argument. The establishment of an agonistic system is itself a reason-governed regime. Moreover, it is one that will require complex inter-hegemonic mediations that could only develop through rational cooperation. This idea is reflected in the agonistic cosmopolitanism of authors such as William Connolly (2005). Mouffe responds to this

by arguing that even an agonistic system will be incomplete, with new hegemonies emerging that refuse to participate. There must always be a *constitutive exterior* for any political articulation to exist.

This is the point at which traditional cosmopolitanism finds its ultimate end, and pushes us toward a new formality. When we talk of exteriors, we remain within the spatial idealism of intimate spheres and hegemonic articulations. If cosmopolitanism is to be saved, it cannot have the same formality as a sphere or a hegemonic articulation. That is, it cannot be understood geometrically or spatially. My argument is that cosmopolitanism, as a universal humanity, must be understood as a contingent *event*.

Reconstructing cosmopolitanism

Laclau and Mouffe's critique of structural determination and historical necessity seems to be directed predominantly at Marx. A close reading reveals their real target: Hegel. Was it not Hegel who provided the most totalising system in philosophy, the dialectical development of spirit toward a state of 'absolute knowing', in which each sublation (*aufheben*) fully captures both the personal and historical contradictions of the moment? Is absolute knowing, therefore, not the eschatological rapture mentioned above, at which point both intimacy and cosmopolitanism have no difference and hence no future?

The idea that Hegel's logic makes no room for contingency is unfounded. In missing Hegel's concept of contingency, critics also miss an opportunity to think about cosmopolitanism in a new way. Classical metaphysics views the contingent as that which is possible, but not yet actual. It thus of course depends on a future-oriented temporal perspective. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel (1969) makes the unique argument that contingency is the unity of the possible and the actual. This produces a seemingly paradoxical relationship between the contingent and the necessary. First, it

constitutes a change in temporal perspective, where a situation that *currently exists* is seen to have nevertheless been contingent. The situation could have been otherwise. Yet, to say that a situation does exist is also to say that it is the result of determinative causes, which is an acknowledgment of its necessity. Hence Hegel introduces the dialectical terms 'contingent necessity' and 'necessary contingency'. The contradiction only makes sense by creating a boundary around the situation as a 'moment' in time and space. Any cause that exists beyond the moment is hidden in the complexity of the cosmos, and hence makes the moment appear contingent. However, from the perspective of the experience of the moment its characteristics seem necessary. Before the dialectic is sublated into a moment, contingency is experienced as real. It disappears from experience once the sublation has occurred. For Hegel, contingency *is* a limit on reason. It is clear that before the moment, contingency causes reason to exist only abstractly or notionally.

Hegel's logic is perspectival. Indeed, this is evident in his often reiterated point that the dialectic can only be worked out as phenomena *appear* to consciousness, a point that his phenomenological and post-structural critics often supress. This reveals the complex character of sublation in Hegel's logic. Sublation negates a negation to resolve a contradiction and provide the subject with a moment that, from his or her perspective, appears necessary. Yet once we recognise that this necessity is perspectival, it follows that sublation also cuts the subject off from a domain of contingency. Hence, Hegel's logic accommodates a contingent excess, and hence the exterior development of radical difference.

This is explored on the scale of historical formations in Susan Buck-Morss's (2009) astonishing account of the Haitian slave revolt between 1791 and 1804. Buck-Morss describes the discourse of revolution and human freedom that evolved in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and found its zenith in the French Revolution. Of course,

this narrative was highly influential on Hegel and his conception of a world spirit, a universal humanity moving intrepidly toward freedom. Yet, African slaves were nowhere to be found in this discourse. They were the excess that had no place in the dominant dialect between the Enlightenment Citizen and *Ancien Régime*. Yet this excess was not inert. Buck-Morss intricately explores the way the Black Jacobins painfully took up the struggle for liberty seeded in the French Revolution and used it to claim independence from Napoleonic France. In the process, she deconstructs a Eurocentric view of human progress toward freedom, including some of Hegel's own forms of racism. A new insight into a universal humanity emerges: every excess, every forgotten or excluded group, has the capacity to re-join the historical dialectic of freedom via the often blood-soaked desire for that very freedom. Here, Buck-Morss draws on Hegel's exploration of the lord and bondsman. The bondsman emerges from a state of objectivity, finding subjectivity in production, and from this goes on to demand recognition and freedom from the lord, risking his or her life. It is in this life or death struggle, when someone like the slave is stripped of their humanity, where Buck-Morss locates the universal aspect of humanity. This is conceptualised within the Hegelian system of a dialectical moment, but with an affective dimension that Hegel lacked.

It is this understanding of cosmopolitanism as a dialectical event, driven by the will to freedom and recognition, and existing within a terrain of contingency, that I wish to now formally develop in relation to intimacy. Recalling Sloterdijk, the formality of intimacy is a being-from-birth and a being-toward-death within a sphere that has the capacity for opening and closing. This capacity thus puts it in a dialectical relation to an exterior, which in today's complex society is constituted by a plurality of other spheres that are morphologically scalable. The point at which two spheres encounter one another constitutes the cosmopolitan event. Rather than an ontology of a growing and dying sphere, the event has an

ontology of contingency as Hegel describes it, where the possible and the actual are unified. Interestingly, this form of contingency and becoming was developed by Henri Bergson and famously adopted and developed by Gilles Deleuze, a self-declared anti-Hegelian. Yet, like Hegel, Deleuze (1991, pp. 96–97) operates within a terrain of actuality. Virtuality involves the appearance of something real that already exists, but has yet to become a differentiated 'image' (to use Bergson's term) for consciousness. Unlike the classical notion of possibility, virtuality does not 'realise' an ideal form in an imperfect state of resemblance. Rather, it is a process of creating an object for consciousness through 'lines of differentiation'. If we consider this in terms of social interactions, this moment of differentiation is an encounter with others who already exist in the world, yet only as a contingent excess that has yet to be made available to the attentiveness of a particular individual or group. The cosmopolitan event is the moment when the Stranger catches one's eye and demands recognition.

A similar idea can be found in Sebastian Olma's (2016) conception of serendipity as an event made possible by a contingent multiplicity: 'a set of relations is formed, accidentally harbouring the potential for novelty that is "unanticipated" insofar as it carries an anomalous datum' (ibid: 8). Olma continues:

> I would like to approach this dimension of serendipity in terms of what contemporary philosophers refer to as virtual multiplicity: these are relations forming a potential prior to any subjective or objective embodiment. Multiplicity is the philosophical expression of an ontological network consisting of relations — forces, affects, desires — that don't yet have what we might call social efficacy. (ibid: 11)

In this sense, cosmopolitanism is always serendipitous. The serendipitous encounter with a stranger in the city street, for instance. Yet, Olma argues that for serendipity to bear fruit

one must be sagacious. One must recognise the possibility for enrichment and growth and act in a manner that achieves these ends. Here I return to my critique of Mouffe, as her static conception of human anger and antagonism inflexibly refuses to acknowledge the possibility for such sagacity in social encounters.

Mouffe's reduction of all encounters with Otherness to either love or hate is much too simplistic, as if a whole constellation of other emotions cease to matter. Moreover, her insistence that anger cannot be overcome, that it can only be sublimated into an agonistic contract of non-annihilation, is reductionist and non-empirical. Martha Naussbaum (2016) has explored the nature of anger and hate, as well as how to overcome these emotions, in a far richer and comprehensive way. Drawing predominantly on Aristotle, Naussbaum argues that anger is the result of a 'down-ranking' in status or self-mastery that can be provoked by other people as well as the stubborn contingency of unhappy events. This can often lead to a 'payback wish'. The wrongdoer must suffer. The obstinate toe-stubbing rock must be furiously flung away. Naussbaum cogently argues that status seeking and payback are both negative compulsions, as they continue the cycle of anger through down-ranking others, and prevent people from moving on. Instead, Naussbaum argues for 'The Transition' beyond anger. This is a future-oriented, productive social practice. It involves cultivating virtues that can overcome the 'narcissistic wounds of the ego' that are bound up with payback. Using historical case studies, Naussbaum explores a range of virtues that are applicable to different aspects of life, including cool distance, gentle temper, sympathetic understanding, empathy, playfulness, generosity and love. Naussbaum considers forgiveness as a historically valued virtue for overcoming anger. She rejects the transactional forgiveness that demands apologies and abasement. These reproduce status wounds and can be seen as another form of payback.

Three key points should be made clear about this human capacity for The Transition. First, it can and has been applied to political justice. It inflects revolutionary justice in which a marginalised group seeks recognition, and Naussbaum argues that the generosity and empathy of Martin Luther King and Ghandi is indeed more effective than rage and zeal. Hence, The Transition can exist at the level of group encounters, at the border zones between intimate spheres of different scales. Second, the cultivation of virtues is never acknowledged by theorists such as Mouffe. She represents an elitist and condescending denial of the capacity of everyday people and their institutions to cultivate virtues and overcome the Sartrean moment of bad faith. Hence she ignores the possibility of a virtue-pedagogy that is democratic and diverse (Papastergiadis, 2012; Stevenson, 2003). A host of cosmopolitan thinkers suggest virtues that can and should be disseminated. hooks (1992) advocates for a kind of critical *loving*; Sennett (2003) for a skillful practice of *respect*; Appiah (2006) for *tolerance* and *understanding*, and Derrida (2002) for *hospitality*. Third, Naussbaum argues that many of these social virtues, such as love and generosity, are cultivated within intimate relationships. They extrude out from the intimate realm. Hence, intimacy is not fully allergic and immunological. It can have an extrusive capacity during the cosmopolitan event. Just as intimacy has a dark side that can negate cosmopolitanism, it has a light side that can embrace it. Now the intimate and the cosmopolitan are no longer so antagonistic.

Conclusion: Public culture and mediation

The dialectic between intimacy and cosmopolitanism as I have conceptualised it has become a primary political process in our complex global world. In conclusion, I wish to draw out two consequences from this.

First, we should give new emphasis to the cosmopolitan event. This event can lead to new allegiances, friendships and

the combination of intimate spheres. Truly a proper and necessary dialectical sublation. It can also lead to unresolved antagonisms, and hence hegemonic counter-positions. In both cases, the affective desire for recognition is on show. It is this uneasy tension between the intimate and the cosmopolitan that makes change and futurity possible. It is a necessary and unavoidable aspect of social difference. The cosmopolitan even is never teleological, it always produces the new and unexpected. The virtues it mobilises and the freedoms it struggles for will change as societies encounter new problems and power relations. Perhaps the next cosmopolitan contingency will involve willing the freedom of artificial intelligence. With this in mind, we should reject the desire to withdraw into the figurative womb-sphere, and instead embrace the proliferation of cosmopolitan events with the expectation that they may take on many different forms.

Here I must introduce the central problematic of my media research. The technical immune systems that exist in contemporary media technologies are often designed to prevent the cosmopolitan event. For example, filter bubble algorithms, mobile interfaces, media-integrated physical environments, and domestic robots all work to enclose people within their intimate spheres rather than open them up to cosmopolitan encounters (Lambert, 2017b). These systems have been constructed on the premise that the complexity of the world as an 'environment' can be fully captured by sensors and communication technologies (Andrejevic & Burdon, 2014). This in turn requires the increasing functional differentiation of data representations, creating a world characterised by micro-fragmentations, or what Sloterdijk calls foam. This can only be justified if each micro-fragment is seen as a space for individuality and intimacy to thrive. Again, the problem is that intimacy is almost universally seen as 'good', and hence its negation of cosmopolitanism is often totally ignored. A new ideology and a hence a new practice of media design must be cultivated.

Second, the dialectical relationship between intimacy and cosmopolitanism should be placed into dialogue with the familiar opposition between private and public life. The importance of privacy has become a central talking point in the age of social media and ubiquitous surveillance. This asserts the sanctity of an unspoilt private realm. However, it is worth mentioning that the cross-pollination of public and private life has probably been occurring since both concepts were first developed (Duby, 1988). It is unnecessary to go into the many modern examples of this. What is most important is that intimate spheres are not necessarily private spheres. The dialectic of intimacy and cosmopolitanism does not neatly map onto the dialectic between privacy and publicity. For example, online filter bubbles can be 'networked publics', in danah boyd's (2011) sense, that have been algorithmically sorted to focus on intimate ties, such as close friendships. Tarleton Gillespie (2014) calls these 'calculated publics', yet they are nevertheless intimate. This is one example of how the cosmopolitan encounter is often more likely to be an encounter between micro-publics within broader public spaces that have been sorted by technical means. Intimacy and cosmopolitanism should be understood as medial and technical before they are understood as public or private.

Yet this does not mean that privacy loses its value. Of course we often want our individual and intimate lives to be private. Publicity is also incredibly significant. Public culture retains an essential role, for it acts as a staging ground for the dissemination of cosmopolitan virtues that will facilitate 'The Transition' beyond antagonistic encounters. Yet public culture also faces the fragmentation processes mentioned above, making it less capable of becoming a pedagogical conduit for cosmopolitan virtues. This is perhaps the central problem of our age, and the chief reason why the retrotopic turn toward the intimate is rewarding fascists and nationalists across the globe. Neither Sloterdijk nor Mouffe have a solution to this problem, as the solution lies in the intricate mechanics

of media systems. Hence, the political problem of intimacy is a central concern of media studies, but not a media studies that ceaselessly celebrates intimacy. The media activist must call for a transformed intimacy, while the planners, designers and curators must mobilise this at the level of architecture, infrastructure and code. Rebel against the dark side of intimacy in all fields of mediation.

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Notes

About the author

Alex Lambert studies creative cities and the politics of platforms. He is currently writing a new book on Media and Universalism. He is a visiting fellow at the National University of Singapore in the Department of Communication and New Media.

Acknowledgements

The Research Unit in Public Cultures is based in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. It focuses on transformations in public culture produced by new intersections of knowledge, media, space and mobility, within Australia and internationally.

It brings together scholars from four faculties at the University of Melbourne who are collaborating on projects with a wide range of industry partners. The Research Unit's agenda is to develop projects that address four fundamental trajectories:

- how cultural knowledge is shaped by and against the global forces which articulate Australia's place in the world;
- how developments in digital technologies alter the protocols for inclusion and exclusions within public cultures;
- how new practices of mobility impact on the constitution of public knowledge and cultures; and
- how public space is created, managed and accessed, specifically within networked urban environments.

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The dark side of intimacy

Alex Lambert

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In this paper, Alex Lambert explores the darker side of intimacy as it relates to a social and cultural allergy toward difference and the other. He suggests that intimacy must be placed in a dialectical relationship with cosmopolitanism. Rather than a totalising politics, cosmopolitanism should be understood as a faithfulness to a contingent event.

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