Radical Intimacy

‘This was my most eagerly awaited book of the last year and it does not disappoint. Sophie K. Rosa provides a clear and compelling analysis of the ways in which current social and economic conditions restrict and deny our capacity for caring relationships with ourselves and others within safe enough homes and sustainable communities, and how these conditions can be implicated in so many forms of intimate violence, injustice, loss and pain. Radical Intimacy is a powerful, utterly engaging read and a vital call to personal and political action. A must read.’

—Meg-John Barker, author of Rewriting the Rules

‘In Radical Intimacy, Rosa proposes radical answers for people longing for real intimacy, just as she proposes the need to centre all forms of intimacy as radical praxis. We are invited to look for the possibilities of abundant postcapitalist relating right now, and how they might nurture us in overcoming the systems which trap us in scarcity. It’s great. Please read it!’

—Justin Hancock, sex and relationships educator
‘A clarion voice from a new generation of British feminists accessibly expanding family-abolitionist thought and praxis into new spheres in response to a swingeing care crisis. Adept at educating the reader’s desire for a liveable Earth, Radical Intimacy is irresistible in its reasoning as to what constitutes good and bad ways of organising dying, pair-bonding, therapy, kinship, urban habitation, people-making, and so much more besides. In this beautiful and well-researched meditation on intimate comradeliness, Rosa lays out what it will take to make “impossible families possible” and, in the meantime, proliferate “friendship in and against the state”. A book that will convince many on the left to centre the rubric of care at last, even though capitalism is (of course) doing its best to co-opt it. I was gripped.’

—Sophie Lewis, author of Abolish the Family

‘Sophie K. Rosa’s call for “radical intimacies” highlights the cruelty and scarcity of care in capitalist and colonial forms of relating. Readers who feel the terrible pain of ruling-class intimacy, but who have not yet encountered more collectivist support, love and attention, will be especially grateful for Rosa’s words. This book that explores Black and Indigenous feminist and queer revolutionary approaches to relating helps unshackle the mind from capitalist and colonial kinship, friendship and romance. In order to change the world, one must first change the story of the world that is possible. Radical Intimacy helps us do that.’

—Professor Kim TallBear, University of Alberta

‘Made me reconsider so many of the cultural scripts I’ve been fed my whole life. Unsparingly important and hopeful.’

—Annie Lord, author of Notes on Heartbreak
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Sophie K. Rosa
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People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth.

Raoul Vaneigem

Certain modes of relating can crack us open …
We think this practice is ultimately connected to what will allow us to stop going to work, to take what we need.
We are learning how to unleash our desires to the point that they rupture with capital.

Clémence x. Clémentine/infinite venom association

Writing this book during the Covid-19 pandemic, its themes felt raw, sometimes too raw to touch. The meaning of ‘intimacy’ shifted as ‘social distancing’ became the norm; the relationship between ‘closeness’ and ‘care’ changed overnight. All at once, we were confronted with ourselves, with each other and with the state of everything around us. As the scope of our days contracted, our emotional lives and relationships were magnified. To start with, there was much talk of the crisis being an opportunity to take stock, to decipher what really matters and rebuild from there. As the government failed to take effective action to save lives and the death toll began to rise, anxiety, fear and chaos took hold. It became
clearer than ever that we need each other in order to be well, to
survive. But in many cases we lacked the language, modes and
infrastructure to express – much less meet – that need. Many
people found themselves stranded.

‘Intimacy’ is primal and inscrutable, vital and elusive. Like
love, it is difficult to explain for good reason: something so
intricately personal – spiritual – might be debased by attempts
at objective definition. Nevertheless, I will attempt to discern
what ‘intimacy’ might mean, and to explain how I understand
it for the purposes of this book.

Upon learning ‘intimacy’ was its subject, some people
assumed this book would be about sex. Indeed, ‘to be intimate’
is often used euphemistically in this way. Intimacy is much
more (and much less) than sex – though perhaps sex itself
could be a helpful lens through which to understand it. Whilst
intimacy in general need not include any semblance of sex,
as an experience it might mirror some of the reasons people
can find sex meaningful. Like sex, intimacy can allow us to
access desire, pleasure, comfort, tending, tenderness, coming
together and feelings of ‘being seen’. But just as not all sex
is intimate, not all intimacy is sexual. ‘Intimacy’ encompasses
many kinds of relationships. It is a way of being together that
might include fleeting or enduring experiences of affinity, vul-
nerability, nearness and love.

The intimate realm has broader valence, too. It can refer to
the textures of the personal and the everyday; the essence of
our lives. Moreover, it can be, as the geographer Paul Jackson
suggests, ‘a form of commoning’ that ‘is often arduous’. It is,
as he writes, ‘overdetermined by desire, but can also be built
upon common suffering’.

My use of ‘intimate’ draws upon all these understandings
to compose a rubric that includes connection, care and com-
munity; put another way: relationships, social reproduction
and kinship. In this book, I consider intimacy via different
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topics: self-care, romantic love and sex, family, home, death and friendship.

Initially, I imagined this book being called Intimate Comrades, as I wanted the title to capture the co-constitution of intimacy and struggles for a better world. My editor was not sold on ‘comrades’, however – if only because it might be off-putting for some prospective readers not, shall we say, ‘on the left’. He proposed Radical Intimacy instead, and I had initial reservations. I was concerned that people might interpret the term as prescriptive, and assume my book would advocate for specific, ‘radical’ forms of intimacy. It is certainly not my intention to do so.

What, then, might ‘radical intimacy’ mean? At first sight, the term could be interpreted as an ‘extreme’ intimacy: deep intimacy as symbiosis. This is not really what ‘radical intimacy’ refers to here; though it is not not this, either. Rather, ‘radical’ is used to refer to political radicalism: a politics with imagination and abolitionism at its core, that seeks to transform the world by getting to the root of why things are the way they are under capitalism. For example, rather than campaigning for more police on the streets to ‘protect women’, a radical feminist politics demands police abolition, identifying the carceral state as a root of patriarchal violence.* Or, as opposed to more lenient border enforcement to make life better for migrants, a radical demand would be border abolition, rec-

* It is well evidenced that police and prisons not only fail to keep women safe from gendered violence but endanger them further. For example, in 2020 in England and Wales, just 1.6% of reported rape cases resulted in a charge or summons. In 2019, the Centre for Women’s Justice put forward a super-complaint to the prison inspectorate claiming a ‘systemic failure’ to safeguard women abused by police officers and staff. A 1990s report found that at least 40 per cent of police officers in the United States were violent towards their partners, in contrast to 10 per cent of the general public.
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Acognising that borders are not immutable and that their very existence is a root of racist violence. Abolition insists upon nothing less than liberation; as the prison abolitionist and scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore has said, it ‘is about presence, not absence. It’s about building life-affirming institutions.’

In this way, ‘radical intimacy’ aims to get to the root of intimacy as we know it. It explores the ways capitalism psychically and materially predetermines, infiltrates and thwarts our intimate lives. It reflects upon why this matters, and what resistance in this realm could mean. Radical intimacy considers, as the scholar and filmmaker Susan Stryker writes, how the state and its ideologies often ‘regulate bodies, in ways both great and small, by enmeshing them within norms and expectations that determine what kinds of lives are deemed livable or useful and by shutting down the space of possibility and imaginative transformation where peoples’ lives begin to exceed and escape the state’s use for them’. Radical intimacy insists that to remake the world we must pay attention to connection, care and community as sites of struggle. Doing so could bring us closer – to ourselves and to each other – in ways that fuel our struggles towards revolutionary horizons.

‘Capitalism’ is a socio-economic system in which life is organised such that profit is prioritised over everything else. This system rests upon the private ownership of the means of production* (by the bourgeoisie) and the exploitation of labour power (of the proletariat). The origins of capitalism are contested, but regardless of which account you turn to the capitalist mode of production has been around for no more than a few hundred years, growing in northwest Europe before spreading across the planet, including via colonialism. Capitalism has many stages and varieties, though today the word is

* The elements required to produce goods and services: labour, land and capital.
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often used as a catch-all for our profit-driven society and what it feels like to live in it. In this book, I use ‘capitalism’ to refer to this socio-economic system, as well as the attendant forms of oppression it depends upon, including racism and sexism. Sometimes I refer to specific oppressive systems, other times I use ‘capitalism’ as shorthand for the system that the scholar and activist bell hooks describes as ‘imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy’.

The personal is political

A theoretical foundation for this book is that ‘the personal is political’. Popular in the 1970s second-wave feminist movement, the slogan was coined in response to increasing criticism from leftist men that women’s liberation, unlike class struggle, was not ‘real’ or ‘serious’ politics. Women’s oppression under capitalism – including issues such as sexual violence, access to abortion and the distribution of domestic and caring labour – was frequently dismissed by male-dominated radical movements as a personal problem, as opposed to the basis for feminist solidarity. The political work of ‘consciousness-raising’ groups, in which women gathered to discuss and find collective solutions for what the feminist scholar Helen Hester has called ‘the material hegemonies of gendered life’, was belittled.4 ‘The personal is political’ insists that the details of our lives can reveal structural power and oppression. As Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh argued in their 1982 work The Anti-social Family, a key tenet of ‘the personal is political’ is ‘the idea of public discussion about personal life’ as an important component of radical politics.5 This book aims to contribute to ongoing discussions of that ilk.

The 1970s feminist movement was part of a contemporaneous global mass revolt confronting the systemic oppressions of capitalism, including state violence and racism. Radical
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feminists and queers of this era often opposed the patriarchal nuclear family as the primary site of women’s oppression and exploitation for the reproduction of the capitalist system. Many experimented with unconventional relationships and ways of organising care. The Third World Women’s Alliance – a US political group formed in 1968 to centre women of colour’s struggles in revolutionary feminism – described its position on the nuclear family thus:

Whereas in a capitalist culture, the institution of the family has been used as an economic and psychological tool, not serving the needs of people, we declare that we will not relate to the private ownership of any person by another. We encourage and support the continued growth of communal households and the idea of the extended family. We encourage alternative forms to the patriarchal family and call for the sharing of all work (including housework and child care) by men and women.6

By the 1980s, radical political movements faced widespread defeat. Feminism broadly settled on a reformist approach: an equality and rights-based platform that did not pose a significant threat to capitalism. Feminism in the UK today reflects this. The mainstream movement privileges white, bourgeois and corporate interests, and has become associated with pro-carceral, trans-exclusionary and anti-sex work positions that are incompatible with feminism’s central purposes of liberation from gender roles, gendered oppression and violence, and bodily and sexual autonomy for all.

There is, however, a radical counter-current in feminism in the UK and elsewhere today, which is reviving critiques of the nuclear family, social reproduction and sexual politics, and foregrounding anti-racism and abolitionism. My writing here owes much to this resurgent anti-capitalist feminism and
is inspired by the foundational work of Black and Indigenous feminisms, and queer and utopian revolutionary thinking.

The case for radical intimacy

Foregrounding connection, care and community in our political analyses and action can be powerful. Our intimate lives are the source of our heaviest sufferings and most relieving joys, and present ardent opportunities for transformation. Our intimate experiences, feelings and longings give our lives meaning. They can give us reasons to stay alive. The reality, though, is that intimacy in the world as we know it is often lacking. As the cultural theorist Lauren Berlant has said: ‘It’s a heartbreak that the world isn’t worth … our attachment to it, that it gives us objects or ways of life or forms of life that are constantly betraying us.’ 7 Our normative modes of relating and living often fall short – both in meeting our intimate needs and in allowing us to form and build the kinds of relationships that could support our struggles for a future of abundance, rather than recreate the privation of the status quo.

The intimate realm is devalued on the left today, both in mainstream and radical ambits. This neglect not only overlooks the terrain’s latent power for political movements, but sidelines many liberation struggles. For example, traditional labour organising mostly ignores social reproduction such as care work – paid or unpaid – which is largely done by women, especially racialised and migrant women, often in private homes. Ignoring or diminishing the importance of the intimate realm, too, devalues the experiences of trans and queer people, for whom normative intimate forms, such as heteronormative relationships and the nuclear family, are often exclusionary and oppressive. Revaluing intimacy, then, becomes a strategy to resist heteropatriarchy, which underpins capitalism, and therefore to strengthen our revolutionary movements.
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A political commitment to the intimate realm also counterposes capitalism’s dictate that existence is about work and not much more. Indeed, whilst worker organising is at the core of anti-capitalism, a reduction of our politics to labour struggles and little else not only implies a resignation to ‘life as work’ but disregards the fact that many people cannot or do not labour for a wage. As the activist Steve Graby writes in relation to the disabled people’s movement, ‘a vital component in the struggle against capitalism is “self-valorization”, or the autonomous construction of ethical values counter to those of a society based on authority and exploitation, in order to not merely react reflexively to specific attacks by capital, but to positively and creatively re-invent social relations’.\(^8\)

Paying attention to intimacy is crucial when building political movements. The intimate sphere is central to our emotional lives, and thus a potent site ripe for transformation. In this vein, considering the ways capitalism infuses our loving relationships, the sociologist and political economist Emma Dowling argues: ‘As our material precarity increases, rejecting precariousness in our love relations would be a good place to start to build affective resistance and with that, other possible worlds of love and care.’\(^9\) Our intimate lives are the crux of reproducing – or not – life itself. Our relationships and kinship forms remake the world and, as such, are critical to our struggles for a better one. As feminist activists and scholars Camille Barbagallo and Silvia Federici put it: ‘the struggle over “reproduction” is central to every other struggle and to the development of “self-reproducing movements”, that is movements that do not separate political work from the activities necessary to the reproduction of our life, for no struggle is sustainable that ignores the needs, experiences, and practices that reproducing ourselves entails’.\(^10\)

Intimacy is essential as well as the terrain of pleasure and peak experience. Normative modes of intimacy often limit
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its potential, while our experiences and material conditions can make it hard to imagine, let alone desire, our lives being any other way. Imagining that things could be radically different can be a way to reject the exploitation, oppression and violence in the world, helping us reimagine ourselves as capable of rebellion. This relates to what the writer and activist adrienne maree brown calls ‘pleasure activism’: ‘the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy’. According to brown, pleasure activism insists that ‘we all need and deserve pleasure and that our social structures must reflect this’, and that ‘we must prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression’. According to Kay Gabriel writes in relation to trans liberation, ‘the desire for a disalienated life-world – as envisioned in the slogan bread and roses – is if nothing else the demand for everyone to enjoy the kinds of aesthetic contingency that capital cordons off for the wealthy. As a result any genuine revolutionary politics will orient itself towards a radically pleasurable future.’

An overview of this book
(and some considerations)

This book explores intimacy in the context of capitalism through a series of topics: self-care, romantic love and sex, the family, home, death and friendship. These themes are intended as helpful lenses, rather than purporting to cover every aspect or possible framing of the intimate realm. Each chapter looks at how a particular arena of intimacy exists in relation to capitalism, considers how this might be impacting, limiting or harming us, then explores how things could be otherwise. Moreover, each chapter considers the ways in which
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the intimate realm can impede or facilitate political transformation, asking what it could mean to position intimacy as a site of struggle in our movements for a future with more connection, more care and more community/communality. In every case, the book aims to be attentive to the fact that, in society as it stands, there is no way of doing intimacy that will, on its own, transform our lives, let alone the world – or, as the feminist organiser Carol Hanisch put it in 1969, that ‘all alternatives are bad under present conditions’.\(^\text{13}\) To be manageable in scope, the book focuses on the context of the UK, though examples from other places are sometimes included.

Considering the decisive ways that capitalism configures existence, it is an important framework through which to understand life – but it is not the only one. Our desires, emotions and decisions have many origins. Whilst the economic system might helpfully be considered the umbrella under which all else is formed, it is also true that our lives are subject to other, sometimes more mysterious, forces. Psychoanalytic theory, for instance, considers the powerful sway that the unconscious mind has over our lives – for example by compelling us to repeat certain behaviours stemming from past experiences.

Waking up and remaking the world

Paraphrasing the philosopher John Holloway, David Graeber writes that capitalism ‘only exists because every day we wake up and continue to produce it. If we woke up one morning and all collectively decided to produce something else, then we wouldn’t have capitalism anymore.’\(^\text{14}\) It is a tragedy that most of us, surely, would not choose to live in a world like this. We did not consent to the conditions of our lives, and yet we feel powerless to change them. The ‘ultimate revolution-
ary question’, then, writes Graeber, is ‘what are the conditions that would have to exist to enable us to do this – to just wake up and imagine and produce something else?’ As we contend apocalyptic times, I hope this book contributes to the task of answering this question.