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REVIEW

Thomas Dumm, *Loneliness as a Way of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0674031135

In the middle of the last century, American sociology became preoccupied with anxieties about loneliness. The advent of the interstate highway system enabled Americans to be tucked away into bedroom communities dotting the landscapes around cities. This suburbanization and its correlating increase in the atomization of the nuclear family precipitated much reflection on social isolation. The early 1950s proliferation of studies on loneliness—e.g., David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, Paul Halmos's *Solitude and Privacy*, and Margaret Mary Wood's *Paths of Loneliness*—appeared as reflections on these trends.

This move was nearly coterminous with the advent of the concept of the nuclear family in the work of anthropologist George Peter Murdock.¹ At this mid-century point, American sociologists regarded the nuclear family as a bulwark against the increasing threats of modernity. For them, loneliness, or social isolation, was either one of those great threats to family or an unfortunate side effect of modern life against which family was a panacea.

In *Loneliness as a Way of Life*, Thomas Dumm continues in this tradition of linking loneliness in America to the nuclear family. From his readings of *King Lear*, *Death of a Salesman* (with Willy Loman comparisons to his own salesman father), *Moby Dick*, *Paris, Texas*, Ralph Waldo Emerson, W.E.B. DuBois, and personal anecdotes of his mother parenting nine children, his wife's death, travels with his brother, his daughter leaving home, etc., family is at the core of his account of loneliness.

Dumm is the chair of Political Science at Amherst College and author of earlier volumes of political theory, including *Michael Foucault and the Politics of Freedom* and *A Politics of the Ordinary*. In this very personal exploration of loneliness, he shifts from more structural/systematic understandings of loneliness into more idiosyncratic, subjective, and existential accounts. In his frequent recourse to the first

¹ George Peter Murdock, *Social Structure* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949).

person plural, Dumm tries to create a collective experience of which his anecdotal use of his life and literary and filmic texts provide examples. This practice increases as Dumm shifts between more analytic and more essayistic genres. Over the arc of the book, he changes genre, style, and argument to move increasingly from an analysis of the collective social conditions giving rise to loneliness to the existential experience of it.

This tension emerges at the level of defining the concept of loneliness. On the one hand, he talks of loneliness as a domain of life, a "structural situation," (25) or an effacing of public and private realms of life (29); on the other, he focuses primarily on individual experiences of the condition and how loneliness is mediated in particular lives. He believes that "being present at the place of our absence is what it means to experience loneliness." (16) This experience is not alienation or anomie; it does not arise through negotiations of technology or capital. While Dumm puts a social structural tint to it, his examples are about individual relationships. He never reconciles the individualistic idiosyncratic propensities of the objects of his analyses with the broader, structural claims. And more importantly, he demonstrates no method, no possible synecdochic or metonymic relationships between the fragmentary issues of individual experience and the nature of modern American life.

He explores this experience through a prologue on *King Lear* and an epilogue on his personal experiences of writing on loneliness and four chapters "about how we are in the world (Being), how we attempt to hold the world (Having), how we desire (Loving), and how we suffer loss (Grieving)." (19) In the first two sections—"Prologue: Cordelia's Calculus" and the chapter "Being"—Dumm bases his argument most explicitly on basic structures of modern life. Over the arc of the subsequent chapters, he provides an increasingly subjective (and personal) account of loneliness. Only in retrospect does it begin to appear that Dumm is working more in the tradition of American *belles lettres*—the essayistic lineage of Emerson, Thoreau, and DuBois—than in the vein of political theory. This retrospective realization leaves some of the early chapters—especially "Being"—not integrating well with this more essayistic bent.

In the prologue, Dumm uses *King Lear*'s family as the locus of his initial analysis of loneliness, but he is attentive to its concerns to broader questions of modernity. (13-14, 15, 18) Yet, his interpretation of the play emphasizes the missing mother—an absence that, he argues, permeates the entirety of the action, and thus implicitly introduces his argument that the sources of loneliness are in the family. But Cordelia's negotiation of this absence and her father's demands for a public declaration of love create the conditions for eliciting Dumm's conclusion that she is our first modern person—she relegates a thoughtful, rationalized sense of love to a

private sphere where it cannot have a role in the public affairs of state and succession. By asserting that such sentiments belong within a private relationship, she not only affirms a modern public/private split, but also develops a sense of individual autonomy. Yet in concluding this interpretation of *King Lear*, Dumm lays a foundation for his argument to slide from a structural analysis of modernity to one of the subjective experience of loneliness—he tells us that “Love is all we need to overcome absence—and loneliness is the absence we cannot overcome. This is the present in which we live.” (15) He shifts his discussion of loneliness from the structures of modern life into the domain in which Cordelia had just relegated her sentiments, the private internal workings of her family.

Dumm briefly brings the discussion back to the level of modernity in his chapter on Being. In this most complex and most difficult of the chapters, he paints a forlorn picture of modern life, in which the public/private distinction articulated by Cordelia becomes completely effaced. (29) The feeling of loneliness, which most of the text relegates to the personal realm of the family, becomes political in this one chapter. “Loneliness thus may be thought of as being a profoundly political experience because it is instrumental in the shaping and exercise of power, the meaning of individuality, and the ways in which justice is to be comprehended and realized in the world.” (29)

His political reading of loneliness draws somewhat peculiarly on Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, though her *The Human Condition* (which does receive a passing mention) would be a far more relevant text for an analysis of loneliness, especially since Dumm does not explain how a discussion of totalitarianism accounts for loneliness in American life. He argues that loneliness is an implement of totalitarianism, fully extricating it from the familial realm; it (on Arendt’s account) comes from “a condition of being superfluous that grows out of uprootedness.” (39) To further explore this uprootedness, Dumm draws upon Arendt’s essay ‘We Refugees’ and uses the status of being a refugee as an analogy for the experience of loneliness. (44) But he does not make the argument that there is something inherent in modern life that resembles the condition of being a refugee. This status is not a model of modern life; just the effects of being a refugee are similar to those of loneliness. While he starts to place the problem of loneliness into a public realm, he pulls it back from being fully political; it falls back onto individual experience.

In his chapter “Having” Dumm argues that capitalism is a symptom of the lonely self. By interpreting it as a sign of, rather than cause of, loneliness, he establishes a framework in which loneliness arises through the personal negotiations of modern family life and not from a common experience of modernity. In his readings of capital and consumption as symptoms, he briefly discusses the commodification of

the self, in which the self develops through self-possession: to be free is to be no longer beholden (to own oneself), i.e., to be alone (70), but his analysis here collapses being alone into loneliness.

While *Death of a Salesman* may justify such a reading of one's role in a family, he recasts *Moby Dick* as a tale of a sundered family. (85, 88) As in much mid-century sociology, Dumm rests his sense of loneliness in family life. As he shifts discussions to the locus of the family, his salesman father appears alongside the lonely Willy Loman. Here we see the beginning, of what becomes a predominant motif in the latter half of the book, Dumm's own family dynamics.

As he moves into his chapter "Loving," he places the discussion of loneliness entirely in the nuclear family, including his marriage and a discussion of his mother bringing up nine children. In his reading of the Wim Wenders' film *Paris, Texas*, he explores the nuclear family and its shifting boundaries of inclusion/exclusion and the forlornness of a man who cannot fully integrate into his natal one (with his brother) nor his conjugal one. Their presence is insufficient to overcome an internal loneliness.

In his chapter "Grieving" we find the lineage into which Dumm imagines *Loneliness as a Way of Life* falling, the essayistic tradition of American *belles-lettres*. His discussion of his wife's death from cancer is approached through Emerson's and DuBois's own discussions of the deaths of their respective sons. Here he asserts connections between "personal grief and the world at large," (134) though he acknowledges that it is difficult to describe this connection. But the possibly synecdochic or metonymic relationship is not fully explored. Does he smuggle in some of Emerson's transcendentalism to implicitly make this argument? What does his grief for his lost wife tell us about loneliness in America? He tries to answer some of these questions via recourse to Judith Butler's "Violence, Mourning, Politics." However, his appropriation relies on a reduction of grief as relational to grief as public. While grief may arise from an "I" losing a "you," that bond is not necessarily public; he effects that same effacement of the public/private split the collapse of which leads to loneliness. Arendt's effacing of the public/private split arises through a totalitarian elimination of the social space of the public. But the grieving loss of Dumm's space does not 1) preclude some other presence in the private, e.g., his children, and 2) does not occur in a place in which social space is publicly unavailable. There remains the possibility of a retreat into a private space, e.g., the haven of a nuclear family.

In his Epilogue, we learn that after returning home from a trip to Africa with his brother, the process of writing became a means to understand the loss of his wife

and to embrace loneliness as a solace for the pain. One wants to like the text for its seeming honesty and openness, but still there is a sense that he has withheld as much as shown; the text reveals a discomfort with his own call for revelation. There is a greater honesty to be found in his readings of narratives—*Paris, Texas, Moby Dick* and *King Lear*. There is a tacit confession of a personal loss in these readings that is very honest. As we learn how he understands these texts, we have a greater sense of Dumm than in the controlled revelations of his family life. Lingering longer with the pathos of these characters and less with his own family would strengthen the book.

His structural reading of loneliness as a condition of modern life is the least compelling, a weakness that makes the subjective readings of loneliness in Wenders, Melville and Shakespeare stronger by comparison. And yet the effacement of the public/private, which in Arendt's reading of totalitarianism is about the elimination of a public space for the social, becomes perpetuated by his making public of the private, a propensity increasingly common with social networking, 'reality tv', etc. Does the voluntary collapse of privacy produce loneliness? Perhaps, more accurately, it arises from it. However, we remain unclear about the status of this question and the experience of loneliness. We are uncertain because we are left not knowing the status of the personal in a society in which the self is established through processes of consumption and in which public space is far too subordinate to the personal. Dumm moves too much in this direction and thus fails to account fully for the presence of loneliness in American social life.

Loneliness as a Way of Life is a text in which the indecision of genre undermines some compelling analyses, one in which the inability to articulate the means of switching from an individual loneliness to a problem of modern American life undercuts the sensitive readings of many texts.

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