



BOOK REVIEW

## Teri Chettiar. *The Intimate State: How Emotional Life Became Political in Welfare-State Britain*

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Modern British culture is commonly associated with stoicism and self-restraint, qualities epitomized by the trope of the stiff upper lip and the directive to “keep calm and carry on.” In this rich and finely wrought study, Teri Chettiar counters that conventional image by revealing the centrality of intimacy to the political project of social democracy. The years 1945 to 1979, Chettiar argues, were a “psychopolitical era,” in which experts across the human sciences united behind a drive to enhance the emotional lives of Britons (17). Far from demanding the repression of feeling, these experts developed new therapeutic practices and policy interventions aimed at eliciting what they defined to be “healthy” and “mature” forms of intimate expression. The effort to create an emotionally fulfilled citizenry had important legislative effects, underpinning a range of reforms from the liberalization of divorce laws to the decriminalization of homosexuality. It also found broad appeal within the population as a whole, adopted especially by those on the margins of society, such as women, queer people, and adolescents, as a means of seeking public acceptance of their distinct emotional subjectivities.

Chettiar’s argument proceeds in two chronological parts. The first explores how and why a certain version of intimacy—one centered on an idealized relationship between mother and child within a “male-breadwinning, female-homemaking nuclear family”—emerged as a cornerstone of the political project of the welfare state (10). The first two chapters outline how anxiety about the fragility of liberal democracy in the context of the two world wars gave rise to a “psychologized vision of responsible citizenship” that viewed the rearing of children in loving households as the best buttress for lasting peace and social harmony (55). The next two chapters trace the implications of this new imperative for those whose life experiences failed to conform to the archetype of the intimate family. In the 1950s and 1960s, the figure of the “miserable married woman” became a particular focus of concern, giving rise to initiatives such as the Cassel Hospital for Functional Nervous Disorders in London, in which women performed childcare and chores as a form of rehabilitation (80). The expectation was that by enabling women to practice motherhood in a supportive atmosphere, they would eventually achieve a more natural, indeed effortless, expression of maternal love. At the same time, state support for marriage counseling—which was provided free of charge—led thousands of unhappy husbands and wives to take up couples’ therapy. These services coached spouses not only on how to reconcile disagreements or resolve sexual incompatibility, but also encouraged them to develop a shared, mutually fulfilling emotional life.

The book's second part shifts to an examination of intimacy within the liberatory projects of the 1960s and 1970s, exploring how queer individuals, adolescents, and so-called "battered women" pushed at the boundaries of the heteronormative nuclear family to seek recognition of their distinct emotional experiences and attachments (212). In a particularly important chapter, Chettiar reveals the political power of queer counseling and befriending services, which expanded rapidly in the wake of decriminalization as gay activists sought to destigmatize homosexuality and encourage queer self-acceptance. While scholars have often dismissed befriending efforts as a nonpolitical adjunct to the broader liberation project, Chettiar presents queer counseling as an essential means of public engagement, one that challenged heteronormative sexual values and enabled queer people to imagine more egalitarian, inclusive, and accepting social alternatives.

Drawing on a comprehensive reading of governmental and therapeutic archives, Chettiar proves especially adept at teasing out the mixed legacies of the postwar emphasis on intimate relationality. On the one hand, the focus on emotional wellbeing provided new opportunities for women to express their dissatisfaction in motherhood and marriage and to prioritize their own interpersonal needs. On the other, it tended to collapse persistent socioeconomic and gender inequalities into a problem of emotional fulfillment, implying that anyone unable to find happiness within the context of the nuclear family had simply failed to achieve full emotional maturity. Appeals to intimacy also allowed queer people to represent relationships that diverged from the marital, child-producing ideal as valuable and worthy of recognition. Yet these arguments remained tied to conventional notions of respectability that celebrated monogamy and lifelong attachments while associating queer promiscuity or gender-crossing with psychological ill-health. In this respect, Chettiar's framework not only demonstrates that Britain's sexual revolution was less concerned with *sex per se*, than with intimacy broadly defined, but it also illuminates some of the more conservative tendencies underlying the quest for liberation in the 1960s and 1970s.

Wide-ranging and insightful, *The Intimate State* breaks new ground by revealing the profound political concern with the regulation of intimacy during Britain's social democratic era, as well as how this emphasis was taken up by a diverse array of reformers, activists, and citizens. As in any study, there remain some lines of inquiry that deserved more attention. It was surprising, for instance, that Chettiar did not examine the impact of intimate relationality on adoption policy, given how dramatically domestic adoption practices shifted in the postwar era toward the unsealing of records and the facilitation of lasting relationships between adopted children and birth parents, especially mothers. In addition, Chettiar's focus on gender, sexuality, and class allows for less attention to be paid to race and ethnicity. The book does not examine how communities of color used the rhetoric of intimacy to advocate for greater social equality, nor does it explore how experts and politicians employed notions of emotional maturity to stigmatize minority families and to deny them the full benefits of citizenship. Chettiar's examination concentrates on redemptive spaces—child guidance clinics, queer help lines, domestic violence shelters—where intimacy was invoked as part of a broader effort to rehabilitate individuals and find a place for them within the mainstream of British life. It is likely that the appeal to intimacy would look quite different in spaces of social exclusion: law courts, prisons, refugee detention centers, and the like. These omissions do not seriously detract from the importance of this study. If anything, they demonstrate the power and originality of Chettiar's framework, which opens up exciting further pathways of inquiry for scholars of postwar Britain.