Physically Distant – Socially Intimate

Reflecting on Public Performances of Resistance in a Pandemic Situation

Marion Hamm

ABSTRACT: In the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic situation, physical interaction and public performances became difficult, while use of digital media for public and private purposes was extended and intensified. This affected citizens' right of assembly and led to new forms of collective sociality. This article analyses how social intimacy was re-arranged during lockdown through a thick description of mediated performances circulating on Italy's Day of Liberation from Nazi fascism. It examines how a politicised commemoration of resistance echoed fears and desires relating to the virus and enabled the production of subjectivities in a transnational techno-social environment. Combining Lauren Berlant's concept of intimate publics with theories of media, social movements, mediation and national identity, it offers an analytical framework detailing three layers of social intimacy: spatial/corporeal materiality, biography and mediation.

KEYWORDS: biography, corporeality, digital ethnography, emotion, intimacy, mediation, protest, spatiality

The Italian Day of Liberation, a manifestation commemorating resistance which contains and transgresses the popular, the national and the political, is not usually seen as intimate. This article examines how social intimacy was constructed and re-arranged during this public performance (Hamm 2020) under lockdown. Based on fieldnotes, online communication on the day, open-ended digital strolls and peer-to-peer communication, I constructed a thick description by contextualising ethnographic scenes around mediated micro-interactions enacted in three homes in Italy, Austria and the United Kingdom. This resulted in an analytical framework detailing three layers of social intimacy: spatial/corporeal materiality, biography and mediation.

Anthropologists and feminists have challenged the intimacy = private equation by reframing the issue as relations between the private–public dichotomy and the intimate (Gauthier and Mercier 2017; Linke

2011). The Habermasian public sphere, for instance, relied on the intimate space of semi-public salons and coffee houses. In turn, the culture, or institution, of intimacy is 'deeply rooted in the way individuals construct a sense of selves in relation to others' (Sehlikoglu 2015: 77). Lauren Berlant's (2008) concept of an 'intimate public' captures the collective dimensions of intimacy. As intimate publics are 'constituted by strangers who consume common texts and things' (2008: viii), the concept lends itself to analysing mediated social intimacy. It leaves room for the political, although 'this aspect is usually not enacted' (Linke 2011: 15). However, an intimate element is often present in protest situations. Scholars emphasise the expressive and affective in social movements, analysing emotions, narratives, rituals, as well as visual and corporeal practices (Baumgarten et al. 2014; Goodwin et al. 2009; McDonald 2007). Acknowledging the intimacy between self, space and media may add to

our understanding of mediated and corporeal performances of resistance and the power of ‘tweets in the streets’ (Gerbaudo 2012).

Social intimacy resonates with the concept of nations as ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991) which rely on personal everyday practices such as the synchronised reading of newspapers. Michael Herzfeld’s (2016) anthropological concept of cultural intimacy tackles the relationship between the official national narrative and ‘aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’ (2016: 3).

Festa della Liberazione – Three Scenes in Three Countries

The Festa della Liberazione, also known as *Anniversario della Resistenza*, on 25 April has been officially part of Italy’s national calendar since 1946 and was institutionalised as a public holiday three years later. Showing the Italian tricolour and performing the partisan song “Bella Ciao” were introduced as elements of this public national ritual (Hamm and Schemmer 2019). 25 Aprile is organised by governmental institutions as well as citizens’ organisations. Although it has been contested by the far right for some time, and the festivities became less prominent over time, it remains a performance of national identity as popular and anti-fascist. A scenic ethnographic vignette provides a starting point for reflecting on layers of mediated social intimacy and political communication in a pandemic situation.

It is the morning of 25 April 2020, the 75th anniversary of Italy’s liberation from fascism and Nazi occupation as proclaimed by the resistance movement. Usually, the day is celebrated with street parties, concerts, food, political rallies, marching bands and a range of ceremonies. None of this will be possible today. Italy is the European country hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic with 26,384 registered deaths. Such numbers are announced daily on TV, radio and the press across Europe. Three women in three cities are engaging in this public ritual under lockdown.

Lockdown in London

The door of a balcony on the upper floor of a large housing estate swings open. A woman in an oversized t-shirt, her dark hair ruffled, steps out. It is very early. She looks around, disappears and comes back with a Bluetooth speaker. She blasts out a familiar tune at full volume, again and again. She dances, stops for a bit,

makes a coffee, comes back and continues her dance to the raucous gypsy-punk rhythms. The music is Goran Bregović’s version of the song “Bella Ciao”, which was recorded at his 2013 Paris concert and which is available on YouTube. It is the only sound that can be heard. Nobody reacts. The woman dances. Later, she sends a message: ‘And here comes my favourite version of *Bella Ciao* that I’ve been dancing at an unbearable volume since 7am this morning 😊.’

Lockdown in Udine

A young woman, tired from not having left the house for weeks, checks her phone at the kitchen table over breakfast. She sends a screenshot of the website *www.anpi.it* to a messenger group, together with the greeting ‘Buon 25 aprile!’. ANPI, the National Association of Italy’s Partisans, is calling for ‘Un’invasione di memoria’ against ‘il virus del fascismo e del razzismo’ on the ‘grande piazza virtuale’. They announce a flash mob at 3:00 pm under the hashtag #bellaciaoingnicasa, ‘Bella Ciao’ is to play in every house, preferably with a display of the national flag. The young woman drops into some of the virtual events. At 3:00 pm, she joins the festivities online on her balcony. She sings along to the song ‘Bella Ciao’ in a low voice. The balconies around her remain silent.

Lockdown in Klagenfurt

The Italian border is less than an hour away. A middle-aged woman in home-wear, still unkempt, is dancing in the small garden of her ground-level flat, phone-in-hand, the cable of her earplugs running from her head to the phone. The morning air is fresh, but a warming spring sun is slowly breaking through. Lockdown has reduced road usage; birdsong has taken over from the noise of passing traffic. The scene is intimate, even if other tenants in her block may well be able to see her from their windows. The music she alone hears is Goran Bregović’s version of the song ‘Bella Ciao’.

Materiality, Biography, Mediation: Layers of Social Intimacy

Situations of mediated social intimacy are widespread. During the public ritual of 25 Aprile in the pandemic moment in and out of time, their frequency, interconnectedness and a sense of intense *communitas* were heightened. The first of three layers of social intimacy draws attention to spatial/corporeal materiality. Physical settings and the corporeality of the scenes are intimate in the sense of the *Oxford*

Dictionary's definition of a cosy and private or relaxed atmosphere: night clothing, kitchen table, breakfast, and coffee. Balcony and garden partially opened the private towards the public, evoking a sense of liminality. The woman in Klagenfurt reflected on this intimate moment: 'Time collapses, space collapses; it's as if we are all there . . . connected by the paths where struggles travel'.¹

The second layer of social intimacy was added through the biographical in relation to *25 Aprile*. A partially shared heritage, processed through different national discourses and biographical points of connection, was enacted and mediated in synchronous time and transnational space. The three women are first-generation university-educated professionals. None of them live in their countries of origin. They are befriended to different extents and share an interest in the act of resistance that was the Partisan struggle in Italy. Through their biographies, they weaved a web of meaning around the symbolic date, enhancing the sense of intimacy set by the private spatial and corporeal settings. For Pablita, the Londoner from Italy, it hints at childhood memories and family history. As a citizen and an activist, she enacts a firm commitment to resistance against all forms of oppression at her workplace and in her daily life, a commitment grounded in a radical history. Jane and Yonka grew up and studied in Germany, and work in Austria. For Jane, the Partisans, their history and those who remember them are part of her chosen daily life in Italy. She is acutely aware of and professionally engages with different approaches to remembering the two World Wars and Nazi fascism in several national environments. For Yonka, with a chosen home in London and currently in Brexit-induced limbo, Nazism and the resistance against it form a reference point in history. Seeking out commemorations of this time as well as the ambiguities of contemporary practices of resistance led her to engage with memories of the Partisan struggles.

The atmosphere in the three scenes above is solitary, unless we consider the presence of smartphones. This brings us to mediation, which can be defined as the result 'of flows of production, circulation, interpretation and recirculation' (Couldry 2008: 383), and which forms the third layer of social intimacy. Anthropologists acknowledged early on that digital media environments are imbricated with material space and corporeal encounters (Coleman 2010; Hamm 2003; Miller and Slater 2001). The question of intimacy in digital environments has been assessed with some concern as a state of being 'alone together' where 'we'd rather text than talk' (Turkle 2011: 23), or

'detached engagement' in (intimate?) echo chambers (Lovink 2011: 2). In contrast, Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyn Gorton analyse media as 'affective tools' (2013: 4). Rather than assessing the affective qualities of online interaction as a substitute for face-to-face contact, they emphasise that media content, technology and subjectivity are coalescing. Media are not perceived as objects separate from the self: 'There is media inside me and me inside media' (2013: 8). The women were connected in real time via a messenger service. The physical distance released them from the ambivalence and awkwardness of face-to-face contact under social-distancing rules. Their interaction constituted a transnational, mediated and intimate public involving 'emotional reciprocity' (Morrison 2011: 37).

Intimate Publics in a Techno-Social Environment

People engaging with *25 Aprile* co-created an intimate public, which encompassed corporeal settings within and beyond Italy as well as within the *grande piazza virtuale*. The intimate moment between the three women was prompted by two YouTube clips showing virtual choirs performing the song 'Bella Ciao' posted by politicised civil society organisations. Both were recorded non-synchronously in the singers' homes, bedrooms, gardens or workplaces. The Pratello chapter of the ANPI posted a clip featuring a children's choir. The solitary kids' corporeality in contrast to the previous year's proud collective performance propelled Yonka to press the share button. Pablita replied with a clip by the British Fire Brigade Union (FBU). Male and female UK firefighters from different countries of mainly white, some brown complexion, some dressed in t-shirts with political slogans, others in full uniform, sung in 'solidarity with firefighters in Italy and across the world'. Pablita commented: 'I love this: 🥰 they are sooo off key but it's beautiful'. Yonka replied: 'That did it. Amazing. Omg hope, struggle and tears are so close!!!' Her physical self was sobbing at this point.

Both mediated performances worked on biographies and political subjectivities of producers as well as audiences. Along with remembrance of the anti-fascist struggle evoked by the song 'Bella Ciao', the clips brought the painful dimension of pandemic-induced separation and isolation to the fore, but also conveyed a sense of defiance: of the deadly illness, the fear, the restrictions on sociality and the manifestations in the streets, and of governmental incompetence and carelessness in other matters.² *25 Aprile*

2020 translated into a collective craving for freedom, agency and solidarity within a national celebration under lockdown. For Pablita and Yonka, these desires were wrapped up in the historical defiance of fascism and extended to a contemporary transnational anti-fascist sentiment. For Jane, they were what people yearned for while singing, dancing, sharing or standing on the balcony alone.

Conclusion

This scenic ethnography unravels how intimacy is not only about the individual and physically co-present, but also about the collective, mediated and inherited dimensions of life. Material, biographical and mediated layers of trans-local social intimacy provide a lens through which to analyse the complex interrelations between the deeply personal in everyday techno-social environments and political collectivity in a mediatised world. Under lockdown, the boundaries between digital and physical, between public and deeply private, were set into motion. Fears, desires and a sense of defiance in a pandemic situation found a transnational expression in a national performance of resistance.

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MARION HAMM is an Ethnographer and Cultural Theorist. She is working at the intersection of anthropology, media studies and history, and is currently at the University of Graz. Her research includes the politics of media, memory and representation, digital/f2f communication, migration and border studies using reflexive, visual, digital and media anthropology. E-mail: marion.hamm@aau.at

Notes

1. Yonka refers to the Zapatistas' Second Declaration of Reality for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, August 1996. She and Pablita had been part of the alter-globalisation movement, where this declaration was frequently referenced.
2. The FBU video includes a reference to the 2016 Grenfell Tower fire in London. 72 residents died due to governmental and managerial failures. It also defies insular attitudes brought forward by the 2016 Brexit referendum.

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