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Inside Stories: Oscar Wilde, Jean Améry, Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi

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A key triangular force field: Emotions, actions and politics

This chapter seeks to understand forced social displacement both as an emotional challenge to people and as a political challenge to states. It focuses on four socio-political activists, two of them politicians, two of them writers, who also became famous prisoners. Imprisonment provides a good laboratory for studying the dynamics of forced social displacement in a stark form. That is especially so in these cases where imprisonment was a deliberate attempt to inflict degradation and comprehensively dislocate the prisoner’s previous social existence.

All four individuals were working to increase freedom for themselves and others, especially in the political and cultural spheres. Their powerful adversaries were, in turn, deeply anxious about being forcefully displaced themselves, either by internal insurgency or foreign challenges, or both. These adversaries imposed painful and, in some cases, life-threatening personal displacement upon those who troubled them by depriving them of liberty and subjecting them to very harsh treatment.

Oscar Wilde, Jean Améry, Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi have each challenged a powerful socio-political order: Victorian England, Europe under the Nazis, South Africa under apartheid, and Burma/Myanmar under military rule. They have all suffered imprisonment: Wilde in Pentonville, Wandsworth and Reading (1895–7), Améry in concentration camps, including Auschwitz (1943–5), Mandela on Robben Island and elsewhere (1962–90) and Aung Suu Kyi under house arrest in Rangoon for a total of 15 years (between 1990 and 2010). As will be seen, Wilde and Améry were both victims of regimes that feared for their own survival: by 1895 Britain’s imperial regime felt its ‘masculine vigour’ to be in question as it became aware of external challenges; and defeat at
Stalingrad made a German victory against the Soviet Union much less likely from 1943 onwards. Turning to Mandela and Suu Kyi, their political fates were, in the end, strongly influenced by the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the intensification of business competition across Asia during the early 21st century. These geopolitical and macroeconomic shifts meant that the South African and Burmese regimes each needed the active compliance of old enemies and victims.

By considering their experiences and the broader geopolitical contexts, we can discern links between emotions, human actions and socio-political changes. We can see how, when people experience enormous anger, fear and sorrow, they are driven to transform themselves, their relationships with others and their location within the world. We can also relate these dynamics to long-term processes of socio-political change. In a sentence, our theme is the powerful triangular force field created by the interplay between human emotions, human actions and socio-political change.

**Social displacement**

The past 200 years have seen a sequence of shuddering social displacements: first by the West (of the East), then within the West (as America asserted itself over Europe), and finally, of the West (by the East). This last process of geopolitical displacement is still in its early stages. It is important to recognize that the term ‘social displacement’ encompasses not just dislocating geopolitical shifts but also emotional turmoil at a personal or group level. The two things are clearly very closely related in many cases.

The most painful – and very common – form of dislocation is forced social displacement. It is painful because it is both unavoidable and unacceptable. That is an extremely challenging combination. As a consequence, it demands action: either to change yourself or change the situation you are in. Because it demands action, it is a dynamic condition. It can change people and societies.

A ‘displaced person’ is not just someone forced to move from a particular geographical location and become a refugee. That narrow definition is far too restrictive for our purposes here. The feeling of being displaced happens to many more people and groups than that. The ‘place’ you lose might be a social position rather than a geographical location. You can be displaced without moving away from your home, as often happens to people who become unemployed. The discomfort of displacement derives from the disjunction between two things: a