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Lauren Berlant, *On the inconvenience of other people*. University Press, 2022, 238 pp. ISBN: 9781478023050.

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On the Inconvenience of Other People by Lauren Berlant is a philosophical narrative about how we live, interact, and make decisions that end up defining how we relate in smaller and bigger social circles. To start with, Berlant sets the satirical tempo of the book in a 30-page-long prelude titled “Intentions,” with the phrase “hell is other people” (p. 26), borrowed from Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. This perhaps implies that despite us being masters of our own life choices, we end up being scrutinized and judged by others—hence leaving us in their inconvenience. The book is divided into three chapters “Sex in the Event of Happiness” (Chapter 1), “The Commons” (Chapter 2), and “On Being in Life Without Wanting the World” (Chapter 3). Finally, there is the coda “My Dark Places” (pp. 148–172), which serves as a continuation of the third essay, but quickly transitions from the “inconvenience” subject to the unbearable. The book is rich in both content and form throughout all its sections, with Berlant cleverly interweaving different but nuanced social dynamics to invite the readers into the complexities of the world we live in.

Chapter 1 of the book is about the inconveniences we, either inadvertently or intentionally, cause to other people, or vice versa. The author attempts to draw the readers’ attention to the deliberate angle of human nature to build or destroy others based on subjective interpretation of current circumstances. We are further challenged in Chapter 2 on how to coexist in a society full of controversies. The third chapter alludes to the consequences of extreme inequalities in life, which would literary make some of us live “without wanting the world.” It is, however, clear that each of the three essays of the book explains different ways of being inconvenient to others and how, in our own ways, we should bear with whichever inconveniences. For instance, like most feminists, the author demonstrates that while sex is naturally supposed to be fulfilling, this can also be an inconvenience, especially given that it is not always consensual. This argument is buttressed through the numerous rhetorical questions Berlant poses:

[H]ow can a sex-positive person remain thoughtfully so given the pervasiveness of sexual violence? How do we process being receptive to pleasure if it’s also always potentially

overwhelming in a way that breaks something, like belief in the possibility of trust, a body, or a spirit? (p. 33)

Evidently, all these inconveniences might be impelled by subjective social biases and stereotypes such as racism, social class, gender, or thinly disguised misogyny. As ingrained individual or collective habits, if not decisively addressed, these idiosyncratic judgments can soon degenerate into intuitive inconveniences to all and sundry.

In using Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), Berlant points out that the film's use of explicit pornographic scenes and Hollywood escapades seemed to evoke the "spirit of France in 1968 and the global revolution of youth against imperialism, capitalism, war, and sexual repression" (p. 34). Yet, in doing so, the film ended up offending some people that watched it, hence an inconvenience since it contravened "many normative and legal codes" (p. 34). Similarly, the concept of a joke is applied to buttress the theme of inconvenience (controversy) in our social interactions. Whereas a joke may be intended to elicit happy emotions in the audience, it can also provoke painful feelings if the telling is inept, the message was offensive, or the spectators did not capture the funny part of what was shared. This dualistic nature of a joke clearly illustrates the theme of inconvenience, where not everyone benefits from a situation exactly in the same way as other people.

Creating inconveniences for other people can manifest in different ways, the book seems to suggest. Whilst some people have, for example, used banter to make others happy, some jokes meant to lighten people's moments have sometimes turned tragic even to those for whom the chitchat was originally intended. In such circumstances, there is ambivalence, not knowing if and what we actually want. Such is a typical scenario of inconvenience, with Berlant further opining that "this complex intensity within ambivalence extends from disrespect of populations as in misogyny and racism to scenes of love and political obsession" (p. 36). For the case of misogyny, whereas all men would naturally have women in their lives, either as relatives or workmates, misogynistic men are likely not to hold strong negative attitudes towards their blood relatives of the female gender, as they would for those with whom they have no blood relations. Parental affinity to a mother, for example, could easily supersede the natural hatred of a misogynistic man to any other woman for that matter. It is perhaps against this backdrop that Berlant observes that "sometimes the internal clash comes from the inconvenience paradox of dependency itself, of needing people or a situation and hating to have that need" (p. 36).

Throughout the first chapter of the book, where the social concept of sex is used to illuminate the whole perception of inconvenience of other people, Berlant dissects psychosocial nuances and demonstrates how these can explain the extent of inconvenience some people can cause to others if reasonable caution is not exercised. As an intimate encounter, sex can ideally bring people closer and help in building new relationships. Nonetheless, Berlant intimates that "sex that seemed good enough at the time can induce all sorts of regret and ambivalence" (p. 37), thus creating inconveniences. In this sense, erotophobia would be seen as some kind of panacea for ambivalence, and consequently help people to avoid unnecessary social controversies. Evidently, however, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* seems to suggest that fear of sex or sexual intimacy can only exacerbate the inconvenience of other people.

Aggravated inconvenience through sex is also exemplified and amplified through the inherent gender-based imbalance associated with romantic relationships, where men are thought to often have an upper hand compared to their women friends. Through the reenactment of the scenes of the erotic films and plays *Last Tango in Paris*, *A Single Man*, and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Berlant is able to reemphasize her theme of “the inconvenience to other people.” In a sense, romantic relationships can be either an inconvenience or a convenience, depending on the individuals involved and the circumstances under which these relationships exist. No wonder some people commit crimes of passion at the least provocation, whereas others in similar situations would do everything possible to remain a lovey-dovey couple. Through the anecdotes of the films, Berlant appears to imply that a couple’s ability to navigate through inconveniences during their relationship may be what matters most.

On the Inconvenience of Other People further explores our affective engagement with the world, using gender as well as cultural and historical dimensions to focus on how our encounter with objects and other people can create inconveniences to us. By drawing from various sources surrounding romantic relationships to crystallize the overarching concept of inconvenience to others, the author allows us to reexamine our social circumstances in order to define what is actually more convenient to us at any given time. Oftentimes, individuals find themselves in unfamiliar social, economic, or political territories that would naturally change their perspectives on things. However, to Berlant, this might be the right time to refocus attention and chart new directions in life. Otherwise, “a whole world can wobble when that openness ignites insecurity about how to live otherwise” (p. 76), because that is how an inconveniencing situation can make us feel vulnerable.

Clearly, Lauren Berlant uses ordinary language and makes reference to everyday life experiences in order to help people think about how to avoid the numerous potentially destructive and disruptive encounters befalling them every so often. Instead of being distracted by the inconveniences occasioned by certain objects, people, relationships, or situations, we are encouraged that this should be the best time to exploit the gaps created, in order to emerge stronger than before when it comes to addressing our personal problems. Similarly, self-conceit can be as much a blessing as a curse. The concept of “commons” “denotes an experimental scene of practical life” (p. 77), “too often a way of talking about politics as a means of resolution more than as a path through struggle” (p. 80). Here, the world is “romantically” portrayed as a delicate and exhaustible resource that can be easily depleted. Yet, there is also the other inexhaustible side of the world in terms of “human consciousness or creativity” (p. 82). This binary nature of the world thus encapsulates the true nature of “inconvenience”—a state between comfort and discomfort. However, most importantly, Berlant challenges us to always be ready to use such inconveniencing moments to reorganize our thoughts and actions to ultimately achieve more “convenient” outcomes of our new intentions.


In the last chapter of the book, which Berlant conveniently titles “On Being in Life Without Wanting the World,” she yet again, like in the first two chapters, catalogues the inconvenience of relationships that manifest in many different ways. In her characteristic philosophical streak, the author once again offers readers an opportunity for critical thinking. The first rhetorical question would perhaps be: How can you be in life without

wanting the world? There, of course, lies the contradiction, the inconvenience if you like, with a strong invocation of suicidal ideation as perhaps the epitome of inconveniencing situation an individual can ever be faced with. This is a time when life becomes akin “to a living death” (p. 122).

The poetic world is known for its economy of words and abundance of deep meanings such that enthusiasts of poetry must patiently interpret the deep meaning of its words and phrases if they are to enjoy the oblique yet grandiose nature of poetic works. Clearly, this technique is brilliantly applied in *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. Suicidal ideation is another nuanced technique used by Berlant to express “inconvenience,” just as she epitomizes dissociation as a process through which people want to lose the things they would have “loved” to lose. In her direct quotes, “this elliptical self-division is what allows the pieces ... defined not by what is funny but by scenes of satire, irony, and falling apart without ceasing to exist” (p. 125). Here, the emphasis seems to be on the contradictory nature of the world in which we live, but which we must learn how to navigate. As Berlant philosophically remarks, “while Falconer hates the incuriosity and phobias of the normative world, he refuses to substitute surface warmth for the inconvenience of intimacy” (p. 128). As Chinua Achebe, one of the most prominent African writers, would concur in his popular novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), by quoting legendary poet William Butler Yeats, when the “falcon cannot hear the falconer, things fall apart.” It’s inevitable to be inconvenienced or inconvenience, because we don’t live in an ideal world.

In the coda “My Dark Places,” the book’s theme of inconvenience is still inescapable, as it makes reference to memoirs and replays events to pass its thematic memo. Using first-person narration throughout the book and widely supporting the arguments therein with empirical references, Lauren Berlant brilliantly and consistently ensures that there is no deviation from the book’s prevailing thematic message of “inconvenience.” Clearly, inconvenience cuts across different spheres of life, including citizens being inconvenient to political regimes on one hand, and amongst themselves on the other. Ultimately, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* speaks to the idea that we are all in some kind of inconvenience drive, inconveniencing and inconvenienced almost in equal measure in many different ways. This way, inconvenience remains part of our lives, either as perpetrators or victims of an inconvenient world order. Lauren Berlant’s *On the Inconvenience of Other People* therefore emerges as a great literary and philosophical masterpiece to open us to the contradictory nature of human existence in a world of mighty opposites, where there is no straight way to life.

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