

Friendship: Towards a Radical Grammar of Relating

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Abstract. The article discusses friendship as a centrifugal movement away from identity, similarity and sameness. In contradistinction to approaches that tend to look for the essence of friendship and/or discuss it as a relationship that takes place in a chronotopic vacuum, the argument presented here is based on a certain diagnostics which holds that contemporary friendship has been caught in the centripetal forces of commonality, security and trust in accordance with the psychopolitical demand for the production of shielded and encapsulated personhoods. Drawing on Esposito's notion of community not as a common property or a fusion of individuals, but as constituted by lack and abstraction, and with reference to anthropological evidence on the notion of friendship among the Mapuche Indigenous population of Chile, the article attempts to prefigure friendship as the opening-up of the individual to the outside, a relational experimentation, a radical grammar of relating that can rejuvenate the impoverished relational fabric.

1. Introduction: Defining the Problem

Friendship has been approached from a number of perspectives and agendas, and, indeed, there is considerable variation and dispute concerning its nature, its meaning and its forms. The purpose of the current article is not to produce a typology of friendship and describe the characteristics and internal workings of each type, as is the case, for example, with Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Kant's *The Lectures on Friendship*, as well as mainstream psychology's treatment of the subject [1, 2]. Nor does it represent an attempt to produce a theory of civic friendship structured around the question of whether or not citizens can be friends, whether they can ensure a sense of unity, lend aid and support each other, or, in short, what MacDonald calls "a metaphysics of friendship as the saving grace of social unity" p. 211 [3]. Our aim here is a different one: to discuss friendship as a radical opening up of the self, a centrifugal movement away from what is proper, shared, similar or common (e.g. descent, history, race, interest and so on). Following Derrida, friendship is seen first and foremost as an act (not as a relationship), an act of experimentation and risk taking [4].

Anthropological and historical work on the subject suggests that friendship does not simply vary from culture to culture and epoch to epoch -thus having no stable essence- but most importantly, that its character is indissolubly connected to conceptions of personhood and community that a given culture holds [5]. It is precisely this psychosocial context that seems to be missing in contemporary discussions of friendship. More specifically, the bulk of existing literature tends to follow two basic directions: either it ignores the context altogether and discusses friendship as an interactional subjectivation process –Nehamas’s discussion of friendship, as well as his reading of Ridley Scott’s 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*, is a typical example of this kind of contextless approach [6]; or, the context is identified, almost exclusively, with the virtual space and virtual friendship, in turn, framed conservatively as being of a lesser and alienated quality from “actual” or “ideal” types [7, 8].

If friendship has no essence, then any discussion of it needs to be contextualized, properly situated within the contemporary conceptions of selfhood and community/society, as well as the general relational fabric of our societies. In the proceeding discussion I will offer a brief diagnostics of friendship, and pursue a different theorization of this category with reference to Roberto Esposito’s work on community and through citing the example of the way the Mapuche indigenous people of a certain community in Chile understand and make friendships. The article concludes by proposing a notion of friendship based on experimentation and risk taking, in order to break with the paradigm of trust, safety and security, and so as to counter the impoverishment of the relational fabric of the capitalist chronotope. It is assumed, as Cutterham rightly argues, that “friendship today exists in conflict with capital, and that conflict has an unwritten history” p. 38 [9]. The following piece of work can be viewed as a contribution to the writing of this history.

2. A diagnostics of contemporary friendship

Despite the fact that friendship always begins as a centrifugal force, albeit in varying degrees, away from the common and the shared (the common blood and descent of the family, the common history of the nation, the same ideology of the political organization, etc.) it is constantly confronted with centripetal social forces that attempt to contain it and co-opt it. Thus, similarity, sameness and commonality have been traditionally considered, implicitly or explicitly, as an endemic part of friendship relationships of all kinds and under all situations. Let’s take as an example the widely held belief among many conservative scholars -from the classic enthusiasts of industrial capitalism like Adam Smith and David Hume to contemporary ones - that the introduction of commerce in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was an important factor that facilitated the formation of friendships [10, 11]. What should not escape our attention in this claim, and Badhwar is crystal clear on this point, is the fact that commercial societies were and are a fertile ground for the formation of friendships based on commonality, and, more specifically, on commonality of “shared interests” [11]. Indeed, Adam Smith not only identified similarity of outlook and behavior as fundamental preconditions of friendship, but also explicitly compared market-friendship (based on common interests) with relationships built within the family (based on common descent): “colleagues in office, partners in trade, call one another brothers, and frequently feel towards one another as if they were really so” p. 38 [10]. What Smith’s conservative psychology does, here, is to merely register the centripetal forces at work when it comes to friendship, and then subsume it within the discourse of the family, of the consanguineal bond. Furthermore, it is important to stress at this juncture, even though there is not enough space here to fully develop the argument, that the reduction of friendship to a form of extension of broader kinship impoverishes it and restricts its potential twofold: firstly, by stripping it of its centrifugal forces and subsuming it within the centripetal forces of the common and secondly, by incorporating it into a discourse of safety, security and trust.

The reduction of friendship to friendliness is another way through which the former is downgraded and loses its potential as a radical form of relating. The downgrading of friendship should not surprise us, however. After all, the liberal tradition, as Cutterham argues, recast the fundamental political relationship as that between each individual man –i.e., each head of household- and the state itself [9]. Thus, self-interest became eventually more important than friendship for grasping social reality. Furthermore, to maximize profit, in order to be successful in the commercial economy, it was important that there was a *common* rational friendly behavior which, among other things, facilitated conduct and produced feelings of security and trust. Present day late-capitalism is no different in this respect. Whereas friendship is reduced to “contacts”, acquaintances and “networks” of unknowns through social media, generic friendliness emerges as the most important common behavior for all. Given that friendliness does not come naturally within conditions of exploitation, there is an increasing psychopolitical demand for people to learn, both, the skills of friendliness and how to express them in public. Self-help books, guides on self-improvement and sessions of all varieties (from seminars to therapeutic sessions) with psy-experts offering practical advice on how to improve friendliness skills through the reproduction of standardized phrases and behavior are now prevalent within contemporary life. Friendliness, in other words, is a central component of the general positive psychological kit, an endemic part of neoliberal governmentality [12].

The demand for the production of positive psychological stupefying and standardized behaviors is, of course, omnipresent in the virtual space, as many forms of social media, Facebook being a prominent example, do not even include a “dislike” button. Such restrictions can be viewed as part of a broader psychic orthopedics, operating clearly under the imperative of what Michael Billig has called “ideological positivism” [13]. Users must be friendly, express only positive feelings, or otherwise stay silent. Negative emotion and disagreement are discouraged, and often prevented. Thus, the “like” button produces nothing but communities of like-minded members. However, as Bishop has argued, it is not only within the virtual realm that people tend to cluster with others who share similar economic and political perspectives, and refuse to venture beyond the safety of what is familiar, this is increasingly how people behave more generally: “pockets of like-minded citizens have become so ideologically inbred that we don’t know, can’t understand and can barely conceive of ‘those people’ who live just a few miles away” p. 41 [10]. Lovink has coined the term “echo chambers” in order to describe this situation whereby internet users choose to follow and read material that corresponds to their already established beliefs [14]. It depicts an individual who lives in isolation and avoids contact and engagement with those who do not match their ideas and preferences. Personalized search algorithms that record the users’ personal data, preferences and search history, and then adjust search results according to the users’ “interests” is another example of this idea of an “echo chamber”. As Lovink argues, “rather than foster new public engagements, online discussions tend to take place within “echo chambers” where groups of like-minded individuals, consciously or not, avoid debate with their cultural or political adversaries” p. 2 [14].

The subsumption of friendship into the discourse of like-mindedness, and therefore of safety, security and trust, intersects with the proclamations of generic psychotherapy concerning the building of self-defenses and the shielding of the person against the “hostile external world”. One is more and more enjoined to seek refuge in the “safety” of the self or within the security of like-minded individuals, taking care to avoid contact with “strangers” and other unknowns who might threaten his or her cognitive and affective stability and disturb his/her achieved “calmness of mind”. This amounts to the consolidation of a largely fragile isolated individual, who needs to protect his/her security and safety at all cost. Thus, friendship, as well as love, is increasingly reduced to self-help strategies, and incorporated within the logic of ‘perfect matches’ or subjected to a cost-benefit analysis [15, 16]. Criticizing the reduction of friendship to a self-help strategy, Vernon argues that self-help books on the subject actually run the risk of totally destroying friendship [17]. By teaching us to place ourselves at the centre of the universe, Vernon explains, self-help books

almost invariably reduce friends to bit-part players in the story of one's life; friends cease to be other people and instead regarded as a source for the multifarious needs one has: "one friend to shop with, another friend to cry with; another again to laugh with, and someone else to rebel with. Friends, in short, as service providers" (ibid: 243). The important question to raise at this juncture, then, is whether we can envisage and prefigure a different kind of friendship, one predicated upon a different notion of personhood and community that will break with contemporary psychopolitical demands. This is what the following sections set out to explore.

3. From Immunity to Community

The project of re-inventing friendship is indissolubly connected to the project of re-inventing what it means to be a person and to be in a community with others. In fact, it is argued here, that a different understanding of friendship is that which can help us to re-invent people and communities.

Discussing Community, Roberto Esposito distances himself from the traditional understandings of it as a "property" that joins individuals together, an "attribute" that qualifies them as belonging to the same totality, or a "substance" that is produced by their union [18]. Challenging what communitarian philosophies and communicative ethics understand as a "whole" and "fullness", he engages in an etymological analysis of the word 'community' and arrives at the conclusion that it derives its meaning from the word *munus*, which designates the "gift" one gives (not the gift one receives!) and which is distinguished by its obligatory character. The obligatory character of *munus*, Esposito explains, makes it a gift one gives because one *must* give, because one *cannot not* give, can *not* keep for oneself, thus making it an act over which one has no mastery. Thus, the *munus*, rather than being related to stability and possession (and therefore closure, self-containment, security and safety), implies loss, subtraction, transfer; in this way community enjoys a categorical distance from every conception of property that is collectively owned by a totality of individuals or by virtue of having a common identity. The profound meaning of the word *munus* makes it abundantly clear that what the members of a community share is nothing but an expropriation of their essence; an expropriation that affects their condition of "being subjects":

Community isn't joined to an addition but to an subtraction of subjectivity, by which I mean that its members are no longer identical with themselves but are constitutively exposed to a propensity that forces them to open their own individual boundaries in order to appear as what is "outside" themselves p. 138 [18].

The modern individual, Esposito argues, emerges as an immunized –the word also derives its meaning from *munus*, and is the opposite of community- absolute individual bordered in a way that keeps it isolated, protected and, at the same time, free of the obligation towards the *munus* and thus the communitarian link that threatens its identity by exposing it to the contagion of relationship with others. Furthermore, the community gradually assumes a representation of identity, fusion and endogamy; the common as a relational void is represented as the fullness of a common subject, and eventually the community, identified as people, territory or essence, is walled-in and separated from the outside. Thus, community is saturated with communitarianism, local and functional interests, patriotism and a whole host of things that negate community as a relation of lack. Esposito's rejection of community as a sense of belonging or a notion of unity, and his understanding of the person as a radical opening up to what is outside can help us to approach friendship as, both, an act that blurs the boundaries of the self, and a movement that constitutes community by virtue of allowing individual subjectivity to be given to others. And it is in this precise sense, that friendship can be considered the only properly social form of relating.

The way that friendship is initiated among the Mapuche indigenous of Chile is a useful example through which to elucidate some of the ideas expressed above. The Mapuche understanding of friendship is, of course, indissolubly connected to their conception of personhood and, more pertinently still, to the process of becoming a *che*, 'a true person'. As the Anthropologist Magnus

Course argues in relation to the Mapuche community he studied, whereas it is accepted that the person takes certain characteristics from his/her kinship (e.g. physical characteristics), these characteristics, and kinship relationships in general, are inadequate in and of themselves for a person to be defined as a *che* [19]. Rather, to “be a true person”, or *chengen* in the language of the Mapuche, is neither something one inherits nor a permanent state that one obtains indefinitely either. On the contrary, to be a true person requires constantly demonstrating the qualities of autonomy and individuality, which, in turn, are demonstrated in the act of making friendships as centrifugal movements away from the consanguine bonds based on common descent. Let’s remember here that Derrida was especially suspicious of traditional theories of friendship that tended to remove the obstacle of difference and instead emphasize similarity and commonality: “why would a friend be *like* a brother?” he wrote, “let us dream of a friendship which goes beyond this proximity of the congeneric double, beyond parenthood... Let us ask ourselves what would then be the politics of such a ‘beyond the principle of fraternity’” p. viii [4]. Indeed, the Mapuche act of friendship provides the tools for conceptualizing a different politics of friendship, that is, friendship as an act that can destabilize the relational fabric of capitalism.

The ideas of autonomy, individuality and intentionality, Course argues, are properly indigenous ones and therefore not related to the western individualistic ideology [19]. Mapuche centrifugal personhood neither entails the total subsumption of the individual within extreme forms of sociality, nor can it be considered a form of calculative individualism. To make friendships, then, is not viewed as a means to widen one’s access to resources and profitability, it is unrelated to the need to have social contacts and a vast network of people as a self-help strategy and/or as service providers; rather, the act of friendship as an opening up of the self (to the other) is the very defining element of what it is to be a “true person”. At this point, we can note the difference between the Mapuche indigenous psychology and western mainstream (humanistic) psychological ideas: the “true person” is not understood as a unit to achieve self-actualization, within a network of friendship relations and immunized against what might threaten his/her composure and actualization, but as a continuous process of opening up to others, an ongoing process involving the leakage of subjectivity, an impossibility of closure. For this particular conception of personhood death poses a serious ontological problem. As Course argues:

the webs of reciprocity through which persons have constituted themselves remain unfinished; there are outstanding debts which must be cleared. This notion of ‘debt’ is not confined to material objects, but to the notion that sociality is itself a process of generalized exchange p. 164 [19].

In my reading of Course’s account this ‘debt’ is the *munus*. It is not a material debt, Course leaves no room for doubt in this respect, but the obligatory gift of subjectivity. Moreover, the generalized exchange to which Course refers could be read as nothing less than the mutual leakage of subjectivity that is constitutive of the Mapuche community. Thus, the death of the physical body is not an adequate condition for the ‘debt’ to be removed, the obligation of *munus* to be cancelled and the person to be “freed” from the realm of sociality. As a matter of fact, Course describes a funeral ritual in which it falls upon the friends to remove the deceased from the community by recounting in public incidents of their lives with him or her, thus, bringing narrative closure to the person’s life [19, 20]. After all, if the ‘true person’ is nothing but this incessant openness to others, then narrative closure at the hands of these others corresponds to nothing but death itself.

An interesting element in the formation of friendships is related to the exchange of wine, which, according to Course, is the paradigmatic activity of both friendship and social exchange [19]. Drinking groups, which are formed for no particular reason outside the houses of clandestine wine-sellers, represent instances whereby the opening of the self is ceremonially performed through the ‘giving’ of wine. Course explains that the wine is not “shared” but “given” by the donor to somebody else. For not only is there a clear linguistic distinction between the two verbs in the

Mapuche language, but there is also a difference in terms of the social semantics of the two words: 'giving' wine as an act of friendship, for example, is not related to sharing with others or serving wine to guests- and this is demonstrated by the fact that it is only the initial receiver towards whom the act of friendship is performed, and not the other participants, that ever thanks the donor.

The donor of the wine quietly presents the unopened carton he has bought to a person of his choosing (who is generally not a relative and to whom he performs the act of opening up) who, upon its reception, will appear simultaneously shocked and delighted. The receiver drinks, and then the glass is ritually passed between other members of the group (sociality mediated through the act of friendship). The fact that the receiver drinks first can definitely be considered an act of risk-taking, since wine is the primary medium through which sorcery and witchcraft are performed. It is not uncommon, however, especially when the donor is not well-known, that the receiver first passes the glass to the donor before subsequently drinking himself. This precaution should not make us believe that, despite its centrifugal character, Mapuche friendship continues to operate within a paradigm of trust and security. On the contrary, this precaution is the necessary condition for the act of friendship to be made, namely that one is alive, and it is consequently never seen as an insult. Furthermore, and this is a point of especial importance, the act of friendship (and in extension all sociality) takes place as a form of transgression. This is because the ceremonial act of friendship, despite the fact that other kinds of alcoholic beverages are legally available, is performed by the use of illegally obtained wine. In other words, through giving wine and engaging in an act of friendship one is taking a risk, and performing an act that breaks with the laws of the State.

4. Towards a radical grammar of relating

If we are to truly envisage friendship as a radical grammar of relating and thus break from its relation to similarity, commonality, safety and security; if we are to prefigure it as a way of polluting the immune individual and constituting community around lack, then it is important that we reclaim for it a spirit of experimentation and risk. As Kingston argues, to think friendship as dependent on shared values and similarity is to assume that the shared background and the common goals naturally dictate the terms of the relationship [21]. Relationships based exclusively on what is common and the same not only leave little space for social experimentation, but also, and this holds true for 'fraternity', identity politics, as well as the close forms of 'comradeship' characteristic of various political organizations on the Left and the Right, presuppose the existence of strong norms that generate centripetal forces of introversion and closure. As Foucault argued, the program of action that characterizes certain relationships, what we could refer to as their scripts so to speak, places a prohibition upon invention and experimentation within relationships [22]. And this point can certainly help us understand why it is not uncommon for left-leaning parties and organizations to have progressive political and economic agendas, whilst simultaneously remaining socially conservative.

Foucault's texts on homosexuality and friendship are especially expedient for helping us grasp the importance of experimentation, both, for building new friendships and for fighting the impoverishment of the relational fabric [22]. There is, of course, no reason to limit our discussion of friendship to sexual practices. Of course, sexual practices and amorous states and styles of being together can be important aspects of friendship also, but these are secondary characteristics rather than the primary defining elements. The defining elements consist of the opening up of the self, experimentation as a process of attending to an encounter, a break with the normalizing systems of relating and power relations, and the engagement with dynamic and unstable systems of power relations [21]. As Kingston notes by way of Foucault, friendship means "working together with others to build new subjectivities and relationships rather than falling back on social norms. It is a concept of friendship that privileges experimentation over traditional, institutional or racial bonds" p. 10 [21]. To this, we can add that the building of new subjectivities is primarily dissolution of the

borders of the self and is thus predicated upon risk taking, the risk of losing oneself. This is why friendship can be a highly political process, for it has the capacity to both disturb, unhinge and transform the individual as well as the normalized relationships on which capitalism relies; it destabilizes the configuration of the neoliberal personhood and the network of norms defining proper human contact, it can be an act of social experimentation geared towards the creation of different forms of relating, it can punch holes in the existing relational fabric, in turn, forcing it to open up to unknown configurations.

Now that the means to build relationships, individual or collective, are no longer in the hands of institutions that emphasized commonality and sameness (at least not exclusively): the Church (*brothers in Christ*), the village (*same place of origin*), the clan (*common descent*), the party (the *common ideology*) and so on, we can start experimenting with new relationships, provisional and “sticky”, and break from the stability of shared identity and commonality, and the norms defining who can relate to whom and in what terms. This is predicated upon a radical break with our obsessive attachment to security, safety and trust that keeps us isolated in like-minded territories. As Lovink argues:

Out there are random encounters with a cause. In order to be open to radically different possibilities, we need to say farewell to the “trust” paradigm that conceptually supports paranoid security systems and culminates in “walled gardens”. The “risk” discourse should no longer only apply to entrepreneurs who are praised for their courageous risk-taking (with other peoples’ money) while the vast majority of users remain locked into “trust” cages
p. 164 [14]

To break from the paradigm of security and safety it is important to develop a notion of friendship that is not reduced to a site of refuge and shelter for the individual. If friendship is a way to build community as aforementioned, it is important to reiterate that, for Esposito, Community “isn’t a mode of being, much less a ‘making’ of the individual subject. It isn’t the subject’s expansion or multiplication but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject” (ibid:7). Friendship, then, just like community, “doesn’t keep us warm, and it doesn’t protect us; on the contrary, it exposes us to the most extreme of risks: that of losing, along with our individuality, the borders that guarantee its inviolability with respect to others” (ibid: 140). The exposure that friendship entails, the *munus* of self upon which it is predicated, cannot be experienced without pain. Exposure is a risky threat, both, for the one who gives, but also for the one who receives: “beware of the Greek bearing gifts”, beware of them specifically because they bring gifts. It is precisely this risk-taking that disturbs individual closure and immunity – the latter, as was mentioned earlier, being actively promoted by psychopolitical practices favoring a neoliberal economy [23]. Friendship as exploration and experimentation is a threat to liberal-democracies; a threat to the normative relationships and its relational configuration. As Vernon has argued:

in one mode friendship resists the limiting constraints of inherited social conventions, notably in terms of the dictates of tight notions of family; in another mode it is a protest against individualistic, competitive, conceptions of what it is to be human; and in another it is an effort to create new forms of relationship founded upon the freedom of friendship that go against the norm p. 254 [17].

Although Vernon recognizes in his book the socially and politically destabilizing effect friendship can have, he is hesitant to develop this line of inquiry further. Cutterham too, albeit from a more radical perspective than Vernon, argues that “for capital friendship is a resource to be bought, packaged and sold, like everything else. In as much as it can’t be subordinated to that process, friendship is inimical to capital, and as such, like everything else, it is under attack” (ibid: 41). It is important, then, to save friendship from becoming another commodified relationship operating

within the market logic of the relational fabric of capitalism, and instead re-invent it as a form of resistance. In the first section we referred briefly to Ridley Scott's film *Thelma and Louise*. It was argued that the foremost problem with Nehamas' approach was the disappearance of the sociopolitical context within which processes of friendship emerge and take place. Nehamas' is a depoliticized reading of the relationship between the two women as an example of how "friendship can be expressed even through crime, cruelty and immorality" (2012: 277). Vernon, on the other hand, offers a more politicized reading of the film and takes into account the context, which he reads as being hostile to women and seeking to keep them in check [17]. Thus, Thelma and Louise's friendship is read, ultimately, as one of resistance. But this is an insufficient account also, for it assumes that friendship pre-exists the act of resistance; in other words, it takes for granted the fact that it is precisely the act of friendship itself that allows the two women to resist, a process that eventually entails fundamental changes at the level of subjectivity also. But this too is a partial reading that fails to attend to the profound dissolution of self that the two women undergo in the film, as well as downplaying the profound risk they are taking, which ultimately culminates in their heroic suicides. In short, it is my argument that the two women do not continue in their previous relationship and simply utilize it as a means to resist the hostile phallogocentric society; but, rather, they are forming a new type of friendship precisely in order to resist, and this new type of friendship involves a dual-process of exploding the borders of the self and taking risks.

The final image of Thelma and Louise's car hovering out over somewhere between freedom and death may very well leave us with mixed feelings. But the fundamental point is to see how the act of friendship itself is constituted precisely through this very act of risk-taking; that is, a risk-taking of the self. If one cannot risk himself, as Esposito argues vis-à-vis George Bataille, then meaning is enclosed within a homologous conception of being, the self is subtracted from otherness, shielded off within itself. Resistance and Risk are thus indissolubly connected here: "not to resist", as Badiou has said, "is not to think. Not to think is not to risk" p. 8 [24]. And what is it precisely that one must risk so as to be able to think and resist if not his/her individuality, his/her encapsulation, his/her immunity. Risking the self, then, is the condition of thinking and resistance, and it is friendship that can ultimately bring the two together. It is then, and only then that we can begin to talk again of communication as an important aspect of community, for, as Georges Bataille points out, "communication cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked* at the limit of death and nothingness" p. 145-146 [18]. It is thus time to start playing dangerously in order to re-invent friendship.

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