

TOO CLOSE TO SEE: NOTES ON FRIENDSHIP, A CONVERSATION WITH JOHAN FREDERIK HARTLE

Céline Condorelli

The following text addresses the practice of friendship, as a specific entry in relation to the large question of how to live and work together towards change, as a way of acting in the world. Being a friend entails a commitment, a decision, and encompasses the implied positioning that any cultural activity requires. In the context of self-organisation, friendship is perhaps at its most evident in relation to a labour process, in *how we work together*.

I have been engaging with what I call *support*, which I consider essential to cultural production, for some time.⁽¹⁾ Friendship is a fundamental aspect of personal support, a condition of doing things together that deserves substantial attention, and is in many ways the missing chapter to my book *Support Structures*.⁽²⁾ Friendship, like support, is considered here as an essentially political relationship of allegiance and responsibility. One of the best definitions of cultural production is perhaps that of 'making things public': the process of connecting things, establishing relationships, which in many ways means befriending issues, people, contexts. Friendship in this way is both a set-up for working and a dimension of production. In addition, working together can start from as well as create forms of solidarity and friendship, which are then to be pursued as both condition and intent, motivating actions taken and allowing work undertaken. The line of thought that threads through the following text therefore, is that of friendship as a form of solidarity: friends in action.

It seems appropriate to tackle friendship, itself a relationship, in the format of a dialogue, here taking place between philosopher Johan Frederik Hartle and myself. A chance encounter led us to develop an unexpected conversation on the subject over several months, mostly via email, which forms the basis of this text. While philosophy is the field in which friendship appears as a subject, it also holds the word friend (*philía*) in its very name, so the two are intimately and inextricably linked. The conversation, however, is articulated from our particular respective positions, that of an artist and that of a philosopher, between two practices that produce in different registers, even though they might sometimes share similar concerns. Our practices are usually differentiated between making and thinking, while making is also a form of thinking, and thinking is, undeniably, a way of making. These two positions produce

1. See the long-term project *Support Structure* with Gavin Wade, from 2003 to 2009, www.supportstructure.org.
2. Céline Condorelli, *Support Structures*, Sternberg Press, 2009.

different questions, and, of course, answers, that open up friendship as a productive concept and proactively ask the question: what can friends *do*?

There are many ways of working together, and it is important to put one's own practice in a constant relation to acting in public in the world at large.

My practice, like that of many others, often involves putting fragments in relationship to each other, so that the cumulative sum of these things – words, ideas – somehow proposes something that each part alone could not; through this I speak, not so much through an individual authorial voice, but through a multiplicity of voices. I find my position by collecting and navigating through material, and I try to make work that speaks in the same way, that works by articulating a complexity of material, explicitly in both form and content.

Perhaps this is a way of working that creates close ties and connections between things, people, and myself, and more often than not this feels like a friendship of sorts. I work by spending time with things I have collected, with the references that I carry along, with the numerous voices – of friends, acquaintances and peers – that are part of the process of developing work, which also include the essential voices of inspirational thinkers from the past that populate our thoughts and conversations and are thus also present. Friendship, then, is perhaps a condition of work. It might never be the actual subject of the work – however close it is to a long-term object of my practice, *support* – but it is a formative, operational condition that works on multiple, simultaneous levels.

With this particular awareness in mind, I recently started visiting the small, but rich philosophical discourse on friendship – through Aristotle, Montaigne, Derrida, Agamben and Blanchot – and found it is a discourse on friendship among men. Derrida addresses this problem in one chapter of *The Politics of Friendship*, and yet the issue remains: no female philosophers have written about friendship, to the best of my knowledge, and, more crucially, there seems to be something inherently patriarchal, perhaps fraternal about these constructions of friendship. They are closely linked to notions of freedom and democracy that come from the idea of nations of brothers (and the terrifying consequence that we can only live together because we are the same, we share the same land, the same birth, the same blood, the same language). Simple, haunting questions emerge from this: can I use a discourse that excludes

me, and, if so, how?⁽³⁾ Should I produce my own? And how would a discourse on friendship that includes women be structured?

Your observation on the patriarchal dimension of the traditional philosophy of friendship is striking. Why would friendship be fraternal? It is true that, more often than not, friends are conceived of as men among themselves, in their controlled and rational manliness, as colleagues and comrades. Fraternity – an equality of bodies, styles, culture and size – keeps others out. The archetypal depiction of the concord of male friends is in official or public dress, with all heads appearing on one level, in such a way that the signs of accord are all formal. Legitimate friends are rational citizens who agree on basic public issues: this is the liberalist construction that has dominated political discourse ever since the 1789 declaration of human rights.⁽⁴⁾ This construction of political rationality is exclusive and I think that it appears in depictions of friendship too; while representations of male concord are inclusive and open to some extent, certain qualities seem to be required to be worthy a friend.

I suspect this may have something to do with the stabilising function of 'good affections'. Friendship seems to describe a connection undisturbed by desire, predominantly understood as a connection between mature subjects. It is, of course, affectionate, but these affections are, by definition, not threatening: friendship is an art of life, a form of the everyday. It is a confirmation of what we already are, rather than its interference.

In this sense friendship is reduced to a public agreement in line with liberal, contractual ideas. Should we understand it as a contract on agreed upon terms, or is it by definition in excess of any such rigid forms of agreement? 'In friendship and in politics', the German philosopher Hauke Brunkhorst writes, 'the citizens must, in a double sense, be free. They must find one another of their own free will, and they must be just as free from the cares of daily survival – thus, from labour – as they are from the will and commands of a master. Therefore, they can be neither slaves

3. See also Svetlana Boym, 'Scenography of Friendship', *Cabinet Magazine*, No. 36, winter 2009–10, pp. 88–94.

4. Ideal *citoyens* [citizens], as opposed to socially concrete *hommes* [men].

nor women. Only on the basis of manhood, affection, and property is a “complete”, “good”, and “self-sufficient life” possible.’⁽⁵⁾

Ancient tradition defines friendship as an exercise of freedom. And, as in most of the dominant examples throughout the history of philosophy, such a freedom is also defined negatively: freedom from mere affects and inclination, from the slavery of desires, etcetera. The condition of friendship is equality – which is why it excludes everyone who doesn’t appear as such. In that tradition, women and slaves are not part of the construction of friendship, because they are not free and equal subjects, and are defined as affectionate beings, or dependent on labour. It is surprising how powerful these definitions still are in modern philosophy’s history. Nietzsche aggressively states: ‘Are you a slave? Then you cannot be a friend. Are you a tyrant? Then you cannot have friends. All-too-long have a slave and a tyrant been concealed in woman. Therefore woman is not yet capable of friendship: she knows only love.’⁽⁶⁾

Friendship, in this sense, needs to be exercised by and with free and equal subjects. However, only jurisdictional equality is what counts: if women and slaves are not considered part of the democratic space of the city, but just occupy the physical space of it, then friendship can only take place among men. Which also means that, according to this tradition, only free men can exercise freedoms like friendship. In a world in which women are subaltern, they cannot be addressed in friendship, and are therefore also excluded from its discourse. Hannah Arendt revives the polis model of freedom and places politics in the realm of action, and doesn’t explicitly exclude slaves or women from the space of democracy, but neither does she include them. And she continues to disqualify what has traditionally been attributed to women and slaves: sensuousness and materiality.

I need to ask: what is the yet to be reached? And how about the friendship that women and slaves could have together and with each other? Could the idea of friendship among the excluded turn the problem on its head? Furthermore, could a woman speak in friendship?

5. Hauke Brunkhorst, *Solidarity. From Civic Friendship to a Global Legal Community*, MIT Press, 2005, p. 12.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by W. Kaufmann, Penguin, 1978 (1883–85), p. 57.

And in that way overcome the structure of classical philosophical discourse by occupying it, and acting within it?

If we were to engage in friendship in new terms, this could lead to what Arendt recalls in her friend Mary McCarthy: ‘It’s not that we think so much alike, but that we do this thinking-business for and with each other.’⁽⁷⁾ The ‘thinking-business’, I believe, is work in friendship, and friendship in work.

But in this conception of ‘thinking’ and of ‘sharing nothing but friendship alone’ we have to be careful not to repeat a certain division of labour, a certain conception of the intellect that separates it in a self-sufficient way from material practices. In this sense, the gap between friendship and freedom on the one hand, and nature on the other, has always been a social differentiation. The price that is to be paid for the ethos of city life, the civilisation of the ‘public happiness’ of a ruling class, consists in the exclusion of the ‘infamous people’: the barbarians, foreigners, women, and slaves.⁽⁸⁾

There are questions about the possibility of friendship between men and women, but, of course, also between women or any other ‘infamous people’ themselves. Perhaps one way to proceed would be to think less of the whys of exclusion, and work on how to produce an inclusive discourse. How does friendship, as a relationship, takes place?

In Hannah Arendt’s writing there is a concept of culture, which is close to what I would call friendship: she defines it as ‘the company that one chooses to keep, in the present as well as in the past’, quoting Cicero saying he’d rather go astray with Plato, than hold the truth with Pythagoras.⁽⁹⁾ What he means by this, I imagine, is that he prefers the company of Plato to a so-called truth, especially if proclaimed by a bore like Pythagoras; the politics of such a judgement are of a radical alliance. This is my interpretation of her redefinitions of culture, and the word friendship does not actually appear in her text, but ‘the company one keeps’ is neither the exclusive group of friends nor the production of life, but cultura animi, a kind of humanism. In this way the choices and

7. Carol Brightman, ed., *Between Friends, The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975*, Harcourt Brace, 1995.

8. Brunkhorst, op. cit., p. 20.

9. Hannah Arendt, ‘The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance’, *Between Past and Future: Eight exercises in political thought*, Faber and Faber, 1961, p. 226.

alliances that we make all the time (such as which books to read and refer to, or whom to work and think with), are instrumental in the formation of culture. I find this notion of friendship and/or culture quite empowering, perhaps even liberating, and was interested in not just understanding it in general, abstract terms, but through the specific situation of Arendt's friendship with McCarthy, taking place and speaking to me through twenty-five years of letters they exchanged, and the numerous books and publications they helped each other with.

If we speak about empowerment, let's also introduce Spinoza and his definition of friendship: for him friendship is an affectionate relationship in and through which humans mutually increase their *potentia agendi*, their vital capacities.

'To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being, and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all' and: 'people bind themselves by those bonds most apt to make one people of them, and absolutely, to do those things which serve to strengthen friendships.'⁽¹⁰⁾ There is potential in Spinoza to think friendship as something that goes beyond the restrictions of patriarchal reason and the abstractions of citizenship.⁽¹¹⁾ That also means that the rational citizen we mentioned is taken back into the materially concrete social existence of the human being. Such a form of connectedness transgresses the restrictions of friendship to rational concord, and can include those whose social existence is defined by material labour and intimate affections.

In other words, Spinoza sees friendship's highest potential as residing in the communal development of the intellect. I am particularly attracted to this view, as it emerges from refusing any ontological separation between mind and body. The formation of the common is, in this way, as much an agreement in terms of bodies as it is in terms of intellects, and the construction of a people is the construction of shared affects.

10. Spinoza, *Ethics*, I.c., EIVP18S and EIVApp XII.

11. Or rather, more appropriately *citoyenneté* [citizenship].

Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno have referred to these aspects of Spinoza's theory of society (a society grounded in the physical potentials to form solidarity and friendship). Here, friendship is no longer separated from labour, but rooted in 'affective labour', in the communal production of the common. And affective labour seems to have overcome the dismissal of affects in the name of nobility. In fact it echoes a long history of feminist discourse.

I would even say that friendship becomes a necessary moment of the political, as its constructive side. Virno writes: 'The characteristic of the "friend" is not merely that of sharing the same "enemy"; it is defined by the relations of solidarity that are established in the course of flight – by the necessity of working *together* to invent opportunities that up until that point have not been computed, and by the fact of their common participation in the Republic.'⁽¹²⁾ Ultimately the question is: could friendship be a form of production? Could cooperation (as in service-oriented or industrial labour) also be a form of friendship? Could we conceive of the multitude in terms of an infinite friendship? Friendship could become a model of self-organisation, in which the autonomous production of our own lives is central. All this comes with the concept of cooperation, which has always been a leading concept for the socialist and communist movements. And in this sense the idea of the commune – a communality in production – and that of friendship are linked.

*Friendship in this way leads towards the building of a common, the 'in common', or to a form of commoning. I went back to Aristotle, through Agamben's reading in the little book he published, *The Friend*, and found something in it about desire: 'And as all people find the fact of their own existence desirable. The existence of their friends is equally – or almost equally – desirable. One must therefore also "consent" that his friend exists, and this happens by living together and by sharing acts and thoughts in common. In this sense, we say that humans live together, unlike cattle that share the pasture[...]'⁽¹³⁾*

What is the nature of this consent? How can we know about mutuality? Hegel, famously, both in line with and beyond Aristotle, discusses a dialectical

12. Paolo Virno, 'Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus', in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy A Potential Politics*, Minnesota University Press, 1996, pp.188–209, p. 204.

13. Giorgio Agamben, *The Friend*, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 33.

moment in friendship: self-consciousness is an effect of mutual recognition (and this could be a conception of friendship). But how does one know that friendship is really mutual? How do we know that it is mutual when there are no formalised rules that can be taken as evidence for this consent? Hegel emphasises the dimension of struggle (for recognition), a continuous process of, on the one hand, overcoming the resistance in the self-will of the other, and on the other, the movement of trust, of letting go. Hence friendship is not just a relation but also a process (within which negativity is a driving moment – sublating [aufheben] all the necessary struggle, fear, and mistrust).

This would indeed suggest that desire plays a part in friendship, but at one level removed: not as wanting something from the other. Friendship in these terms cannot be based simply on utility or pleasure, but as a desire for the other to exist, as a desire for life, and for cohabitation within it. This is the idea of living together and sharing acts and thoughts in common, so that what is shared is not property, things, objects, or even qualities (being this or that, including siblings, artists, or French) but an activity, a process of co-existence through doing and thinking. Which brings me back to Arendt, for isn't that what she calls 'words and deeds'?

Furthermore, the activity of spending time with things, that I consider part of the process of making work, allows other forms of friendship not dependent on reciprocity to exist – by way of which I can befriend Arendt's thinking, and work with it.

But maybe something more than arguments need to be shared with a true friend. And there may be no strictly rational, argumentative reasons for friendship, which problematises whether we need words for it. Don't friends understand each other without words? Being friends might be a form of affectionate consent (sensed, felt, habitually agreed upon) rather than an intellectual agreement.

What kind of action and or consent does this propose? The reasons to love someone are valid only when we do already love this person. That thought is abysmal: you can never produce reasons to be amicably loved. Friendship would be built upon grace – the grace of being liked.

While to be chosen as the recipient of friendship might feel like being touched by grace, it is no grace to engage in being a friend; here we are responsible for our choices and actions.

These were the unconditional elements in friendship, and we can now ask whether it is characteristic of autonomous human beings. And if so, whether the idea of autonomy is far more deeply rooted in sensuousness, affection and materiality than we might have thought.

There are, however, also enabling powers to friendship. What is the potential of doing something in friendship? There is an emancipatory dimension to choosing one's allies, committing to issues and deciding to take them on, which can be a force that propels us forward. I think there is a collective aspect to this empowerment, which is the congruence between friendship and solidarity: the knowledge of engaging in a common project, of contributing to building the world, which is also how friendship leads to politics. This of course is also a drive to self-organisation.

This line of thought might avoid us the political pitfalls of a patriarchal construction of public reasoning. But the question of the discourse of friendship's patriarchal construction instigates another one: even if friendship is grounded in sameness, must it necessarily be exclusive? While friendship is part of a narrative of the particular, it sometimes claims to be the true form of the universal. Adorno writes: 'Indiscriminate benevolence towards all constantly threatens that coldness and remoteness against each, which are once again communicated to the whole.' If so, the 'injustice of friendship' 'is the medium of true justice.'¹⁴ Can the particularist, partialist perspective of friendship be reconciled with universalist claims? Or, put simpler, is friendship only about the respective us, or is it, to some extent, about all of us, too?

Perhaps friendship is less about doing something together, constantly addressing each other, and more about enabling each to be oneself, allowing each other for the silence of not taking part. Friendship might be about shared loneliness rather than overly explicit togetherness. Is the connectivity in such loneliness structurally invisible? Solidarity and thus, a certain dimension of friendship, might have something to

14. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflexions From Damaged Life*, translated by E.F.N. Jephcott, Verso, 1974 (1951), p. 77.

do with mutual support in situations of lack and need. We might be friends as we share nothingness – like August Sander’s photographs of blind children seem to do. If there is a politics of friendship that would enable that, it would have to reject the idea of sensuous plenitude.

In this sense solitude appears to be dialectical: aren’t we friends precisely as we acknowledge each other’s solitude?⁽¹⁵⁾ Isn’t modernity in that sense a condition of friendship, too? We are never immediately and authentically friends. Friendship could in fact be conceived of as the reflection of a lost authenticity. That is the greatly modern trait of friendship.

I would support the necessity of a certain estrangement, beyond lack or need: it seems important that friendship should come in excess of, perhaps rather than as opposed to, lack and deficiency. Being a friend might and should entail, I believe, helping out, however, it is always more than that. Solitude is, nevertheless, not the term I would choose, and I am doubtful at best of the accuracy or even possibility of being oneself – and I know I am the sum of what I have read, heard, spoken and experienced. It is essential to behold an unknown dimension in and for our friends, and a reciprocal estrangement, on the basis on which we can be friends.

‘Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode, yet into which all of the simplicity of life enters, passes by the way of the recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them, [...] the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even on the most familiar terms, an infinite distance, the fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation.’⁽¹⁶⁾ If this is the form of friendship we have been looking for, then its potential is both revealed and obscured by Blanchot’s sentence, in the condition that if we cannot speak of our friends then we perhaps cannot even speak of friendship. We however can and do speak to our friends, which is already to act in friendship, as a practice, a process.

Friendship in this form becomes productive and cooperative, a pragmatic form of subjects organising themselves. Friendship is able to manifest

15. Hannah Arendt’s distinction between loneliness and solitude is fruitful here, see also Svetlana Boym, *op.cit.*

16. Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 291.

collective autonomy beyond lack or need, and beyond the plenitude of sameness. While we have to end this conversation here, we could do that by proposing friendship as an elective affinity without finality.⁽¹⁷⁾

17. As it was beautifully put by Svetlana Boym, *op. cit.*, p. 93.