Barbara Brzezicka
Institute of Romance Philology
University of Gdańsk, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6387-3250
barbara.brzezicka@ug.edu.pl

## In Praise of Friendship … Among Other Things

Review: Michał Herer,
*In Praise of Friendship*
(Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2021), 112 pages.

In this article I will try to discuss some thoughts presented by Michał Herer in his book *In Praise of Friendship*. I read it a couple of times and it certainly deserves both the Barbara Skarga prize and interest among young scholars and students of philosophy. However, it left me wanting more every time I read it. In the present text I would like to discuss some aspects of the essay and suggest some possible ways in which the ideas presented by Herer could be taken a little further. Although the below remarks are often critical, I do not want to write *against* Herer, but rather *with* him, following Annemarie Mol's idea of discussion based on sisterhood rather than the conventional combative way, where the author in question is presented either as an "intellectual father," an ally, or an enemy.[1]

The essay *In Praise of Friendship* has certainly pointed to an important issue: a lack or deficit of friendship is felt by many. However, the subject of friendship is almost as old as philosophy itself and Herer does not break with the tradition of *philia* and many other philosophical words (in many other languages) that Barbara Cassin and her collaborators regroup in the entry "Love/Like"[2] (*Aimer, amour, amitié* in the French edition). In

---

1)     Annemarie Mol, "Language Trails: 'Lekker' and Its Pleasures," *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 2/3 (2014): 93–119, https://doi.org/ 10.1177/0263276413499190.

2)     Clara Auvray-Assayas, Charles Baladier, Philippe Büttgen, and Barbara Cassin, "Love/Like," in *Dictionary of Untranslatables.*

fact, I would say Herer is much closer to Plato or Christian translators of the Bible than it seems at first glance. In his essay, he distinguishes friendship from couple and family love, which are inherently corrupted by capitalism, patriarchy, neurosis, and bourgeois morality.[3] Unlike family and romantic affects, friendship can be free from the aforementioned flaws. It has the transformative potential, both on an individual and political level, to introduce equality and cooperation and thus absolve society from the deadly disease it is suffering from. It is difficult to disagree with this diagnosis, especially when we look at the renaissance of various types of fascism, which according to Klaus Theweleit is deeply connected to capitalism, bourgeois morality, and especially to the neurotic model of romantic love.[4] No wonder we turn to other types of relationships and other definitions of intimacy as a basis for a better, non-fascist society. But we must remember that the search for a relationship that is unambiguously good and praise-worthy, an affect that is free from corruption, is an ancient quest.

Of course, corruption was traditionally associated with sex, which is not the case in Herer, who writes about neurotic love that it "is only one possibility, one of many potential pathways for our libidos" (PF 31). So, sex is not a problem and it is not excluded from a friendly relationship, in fact a plurality of "pathways for our libidos" is suggested (although the subject is not developed). Nevertheless, friendship is presented as an affect that is free from evil and corruption. In fact, the story of the word "friendship" or rather Polish *przyjaźń* is much like those of *philia*, *caritas*, or *Zärtlichkeit*. Of course, Herer does not exclude "the other love," which was traditionally related to sexuality and in the essay is defined as a couple relationship. But friendship is presented as a necessary element of couple love, which can save it from neurosis and hierarchy, just as for example *Zärtlichkeit* (affectionate current) is necessary for a "completely normal attitude in love" according to Freud.[5]

Moreover, friendship, as praised by Herer, is presented not only as missing from modern society, but also as something that can be found in the past. Although the author does not present any past period as a Golden Age, it is difficult not to see the times of Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero as more "friendship friendly" than the late capitalistic period we live in. On the other hand, Herer does not seem to praise the model of friendship based on mutual high esteem for one another's virtue, as in Cicero's *Laelius* for example. He rather stresses cooperation and the principle of equality, not admiration and "favorable estimate" of one's character.[6] So maybe the Golden Age of friendship is to be placed more recently, in pre-digital but not so distant times, when workers organized in mutual help and support – like at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Edward Abramowski wrote his program for "Friendship Unions."[7] Abramowski's thought is certainly inspiring for a broader political vision based on friendship as a "transcendental social principle" (PF 58).

Let us take a closer look at Abramowski's friendship unions. First of all, as a "state-rejecting socialist," Abramowski sees his unions as small enough not to become a state with all its alienating institutions, but at the same time large enough to satisfy the needs of its members. So, we are not talking here about groups of friends in the common sense. Abramowski writes explicitly that friendship unions can include up to a thousand

*A Philosophical Lexicon,* ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. Steven Rendall, Christian Hubert, Jeffrey Mehlman, Nathanael Stein, and Michael Syrotinski, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 595–605.

3) Michał Herer, *In Praise of Friendship*, (Zer0 Books, 2021). Later referred to parenthetically as PF with page numbers.

4) Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies,* vol. 1*, Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

5) Sigmund Freud, "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the Psychology of Love II)," (2008). https://doi.org/10.1037/e417472005-270.

6) Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Senectute De Amicitia De Divinatione*, trans. William Armistead Falconer, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923). http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0041.

7) Abramowski, Edward. *Pisma*, t. 1 (Warszawa: Zw. Spółdzielni Spożywców Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1924), 365–75, 381–88.

members,[8] so they do not need to be close friends with all of the other members. What counts is mutual help and support, especially when one of the members experiences some kind of distress and difficulty. By living in the increasingly alienating period of digital capitalism one can surely get nostalgic when reading these lines.

But let us ask here Žižek's favorite question: what if the opposite is true? What if what we have now in social media are in fact friendship unions, both in the sense of contacts we have on Facebook and elsewhere and in different groups created to support different political and social causes? We are usually not really friends with all our social media contacts, but we do engage in mutual help and support, which can be seen in countless fundraising efforts and more recently, during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, in many online groups where people offered and asked for support both in everyday life problems and in crises. Of course, I am far from seeing the pandemic mobilization as a remedy for all our problems. Moreover, one's experience of social media varies wildly with social status, and the perspective of a middle-class academic is certainly different from that of a member of a less privileged group. Nevertheless, virtual groups of "friends" share many structural characteristics of Abramowski's friendship unions and do often act as efficient support networks involving not only close friends, but a wider social circle. And, last but not least, they are independent of the State (although Abramowski surely would not be a fan of the idea that the unions be formed on the basis of a privately owned global platform).

Having suggested this parallel, let us continue to explore the idea that Herer is wrong when he writes that today "friendships, at least in Western culture, are too rare and too weak" (PF 65), perhaps even that there is too much friendship in the lives of contemporary people. One of the important aspects of friendship as a social principle is cooperation – for a specific cause, as described above – but also simply doing things together in everyday life and, above all, communicating. Communication is one of the aspects of friendship that appears both at the personal and the public level. And we know that in personal life today's young people, often known as Gen-Z, spend on average six hours a day online and that a large part of this time is spent interacting with friends.[9] When Sherry Turkle writes about her daughter answering her phone during a trip to Paris, she is critical of the fact of being always tethered,[10] but can one say that this kind of friendship is "too weak?" Maybe, to phrase it once again, the opposite is true? Maybe there is too much friendship in our lives? Maybe there is too much cooperation, since it is so easy to ask a friend a favor with a simple text message and so difficult to disconnect from the messaging app? Maybe the social media fatigue is due not only to the medium, but also to the people we are connected to? And these people are mostly our friends. So, the problem could be not the lack of friendship, but the fact that our social, "friendly" resources have been captured by global capitalism, which is now overexploiting our friendships and our friendship unions to its own ends. We should never forget that communicating on social media, even inside an anti-capitalist group, means viewing countless advertisements and the more we cooperate, the more ads we will see, with every comment working for the profit of the platform owner.

But even if we accept the hypothesis that there is too much friendship going on today, it does not mean that we should stop "praising" friendship as an important value, both on individual and social levels. When discussing the differences between friendship and couple love Herer mentions that, among other features, it is based on distance (PF 39) and then quotes Roland Barthes talking about "something like solitude with regular

---

8)    Ibid., 368.

9)    Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 72. Although Twenge's diagnosis about generation Z is highly questionable, she certainly provides some valid data on Internet use among young people.

10)    Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, (Basic Books), 156.

interruptions."[11] Of course, that is about the balance between "engulfing intimacy and withdrawal" (PF 40), but let us focus on the latter for a while. Perhaps the impression that in today's world we lack friendship comes from the fact that we are so rarely alone and withdrawn from our friends, staying constantly connected and ready to read another friendly message or a social media post. If checking on our friends online is the last thing we do before falling asleep and the first when we wake up (and some young people even admit to waking up in the middle of the night and checking their messages), then it is not friendship as such, but the necessary distance and the solitude that are gone. That may be the source of what Herer calls "too weak" friendship – we do not have enough time alone to build a stronger and more profound connection.

Cal Newport, author of the concept of "deep work," when describing today's working environment, used a metaphor of workers as "exhausted human network routers,"[12] constantly receiving and sending messages. Although the whole idea of disconnecting and concentrating exclusively on work is deeply rooted in the harmful capitalist paradigm of maximizing productivity, it is worth examining in the context of friendship. Without true, disconnected solitude, the necessary balance disappears, and friendship can be reduced to exchanging text messages. So maybe instead of opposing "the selfish culture of profit and domination versus a culture of equality and cooperation" (PF 59), we should overcome this dichotomy and stop seeing individualism as something strictly tied to cruel rivalry and the never-ending pursuit of personal gain. In fact, solitude and some "healthy" individualism (or even some egoism in not responding to every friendly message) may be more liberating and emancipatory than repeating after Abramowski and other thinkers from the past that what we need is more cooperation and community. There is in fact plenty of cooperation and plenty of communities, for which the Internet was often the necessary medium to find each other, especially in the case of various minority groups. But in this cooperation we often unwittingly overexploit ourselves, and each other, burning out the progressive energy we come with. First, social media steals our attention, distracts the communities from their purposes, and wastes their energy. Second, if friendship is defined by a less neurotic relationship than romantic love, then we must take into account that it is bound to be corrupted by neuroticism in an environment based on creating a virtual image of ourselves subject to constant judgment by our friends (as well as strangers and enemies). Finally, we can only cooperate and form grassroots communities on a human scale, which was also the idea behind Abramowski's "friendship unions"; we do not need to be friends with everyone, but the community should be small enough to be felt as such. The problem with today's capitalism is that it has become global, which is the opposite of the human scale, so small grassroots communities are often powerless.

The above statement may be seen as trivial defeatism, but it should not be treated as a definite answer to the question of whether we can somehow overcome the hierarchic, patriarchal capitalism we live in (my answer to that question is: "I don't know"). We should probably never abandon the *ewige Aufgabe* of trying to undermine it, even – or maybe especially – when it means undermining some progressive received wisdom. The opposition between individualism and collectivism is one of them, and it may be worth replacing with the balance described by Herer as a basis of friendship. The principle of balance can also serve as a social and political one – yes, we need to organize and cooperate, but at the same time we need to protect our solitude, which has never been so endangered and overflooded with information and the constant presence of others.

Moreover, as mentioned above, practicing online friendship is much more neurotic than the practice of friendship described in Herer's essay. Everything we do or say online is recorded and the possibility of deleting undesirable content is illusory since our words or images can be captured by a screenshot and then retransmitted

---

11)  Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together*, trans. by Kate Briggs, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 6.

12)  Cal Newport, "The Case Against Email Strengthens," published March 22, 2016, https://www.calnewport.com/blog/2016/03/22/the-case-against-email-strengthens/.

by others. Thus, relationships in a digital environment are more neurotic than those in face to face contact – where interactions are inherently fleeting. In fact, interacting on social media is by definition representing oneself; there is always an identity we are building, an image of ourselves we are constantly working on. Of course, this is true about any social interaction, but in disembodied and delayed communication we become even more neurotic, which makes us much more prone to be what Derrida calls being "ethnocentric" in a broader sense of "thinking in terms of what is 'our own'" (PF 57). The fear of exclusion from a community prevents us from putting the "transcendental principle of friendship" into practice. Online communities, although they bear some characteristics of Abramowski's "friendship unions," are often far from creating "a new type of human, one that is free and strong because he is part of a pack, and because he understands and feels friendship" (PF 58). What they create instead are mostly rigid identities and truly Schmittian social dynamics.

One could say that these remarks focus too much on social media and online communication and not on friendship as such, which is practiced also in the "good old-fashioned way" of face to face encounters. But on the other hand, there is hardly anyone under forty who does not use online tools to communicate with his or her friends (and this practice often takes more of our time than communication in person does). Thus, perhaps we should not discuss friendship only as a transcendental universal independent of the material and social context it is practiced in. If we refuse to look at the material conditions we can come to the conclusion that our "too weak" friendships, diagnosed by Herer, are caused by some mysterious *Zeitgeist*. And what is more, we can focus on how they do not fit into the transcendental definition of a non-neurotic affect based on respect and cooperation, failing to see the aspects in which today's friendships are stronger and more intensive.

That is another problem with Herer's essay – it is quite traditional in the way it analyzes friendship as some transcendental universal which needs to be applied in our various political and social struggles. I suppose this reflects the common idea of friends and friendships, unlike romance – which can be turbulent or even explosive, friendship is supposed to be stable. Hearing "you've changed" from a friend is rarely a compliment. We may no longer see resemblance as a key aspect of friendship, like Aristotle did (PF 54), but we want our friends to stay the same and the same applies to the relationship itself. Culturally, we are more and more conscious that being in a couple involves discussing, renegotiating, and sometimes reinventing the relationship. We have cultural codes that tell us how to react to crises in romantic relationships and how to comfort a friend after a break-up. All of this rarely applies to friendships, and when they sometimes end we lack cultural instructions on how to process the loss. Friendship is supposed to be unquestionable, non-negotiable, and resistant to change in spite of changing life conditions. Presenting it as a universal, transcendental principle only preserves this image.

So maybe apart from focusing on friendship as a universal principle we should also see it as an element in movement or as a series of events. Maybe the dynamics of friendly encounters could bear some characteristics of the Negrian multitude.[13] When regarded as a constant, friendships tend to overrate loyalty and become tribal, losing their political potential. But when we focus on the transformative power of an encounter of singularities – in a one to one conversation, in cooperation or in some other form of practicing friendship – then friendship can truly become a political power. In Negri's ontological definition of multitude the basic element is the flesh. Without entering into discussion with this idea maybe it is worth seeing another element in the transformative event of multitude – and that element could be friendly affection. This image is not far from Abramowski's dream of a free and strong human experiencing friendship, but it defines friendship not as a transcendental principle, but a sort of affection for others that can be found in cooperation and does not necessarily require any preceding or subsequent intimate relationship with the particular people we are cooperating with. Seeing

---

13)    Antonio Negri, "Towards an Ontological Definition of Multitude," trans. by Arianna Bove, Published August 14, 2010, https://antonionegriinenglish.wordpress.com/2010/08/14/towards-an-ontological-definition-of-multitude/.

friendship as a virtuality that can be experienced in the event of cooperation (or multitude) prevents it from falling into the "ethnocentric" Schmittian dynamic.

Another universal, transcendental that I would like to question is that of equality, which Herer sees as one of necessary characteristics of friendship – again, in agreement with the common-sense image of this relationship. By questioning it, I do not mean to reject its value – which is of course crucial in any progressive ethical and political philosophy. But at the same time, in ethical encounters – and I believe the question of friendship is a question of ethics, between two or more singularities there are inevitably inequalities in various aspects. Inequality is the principle of Levinasian ethics, in which we are faced with the Absolute through the Other,[14] but it can also be a principle of a more materialistic approach, like feminist ethics of care. In the latter, the ethical encounter is not that of two (satisfied) equals seeking a "surplus" (PF 38), but that of a person in need of care and a person that can give the care needed.[15] Their relationship is always based on inequality, even when it becomes reversed, like in the case of parents and children. In fact, focusing too much on universal equality can often lead to overlooking one's privilege (that is why Gilligan and other progressive writers prefer the to talk about equity). When reading the part of the essay where Herer speaks about friendship as a surplus, I had a similar feeling to when I read Foucault's *Souci de soi* – those men must have had a lot of time on their hands to be able to view friendship this way and to spend all this time pondering the question of how to achieve greater perfection of their souls.[16] This experience seems to be deeply connected to male privilege, not to mention the privilege of a Roman Consul like Cicero. Women's experience is rather too much of a constant demand for care, which hardly leaves any time to care for one's own basic needs, let alone to discuss ways of self-improvement. Of course, much of this experience is related to parenthood, which by definition is an unequal relationship, but other interactions we have in day-to-day life are never fully equal either.

Inequality can also be an answer to the question of alternative ethics posed by Matthew Callarco in *Zoographies*, where he discusses the animal question in Heidegger, Agamben, Levinas, and Derrida. Our relationship with animals is a good example of friendship without equality. Should this type of affection be excluded from friendship as a transcendental principle? Or maybe it is the focus on equality that blurs the image of singular friendships? Callarco criticizes the model of ethics based on reciprocity and equal subjects, which always leads to exclusion: of women, slaves, animals, animals other than big apes, and so forth. At the same time, he rejects the idea that we should base our ethics on an overly reductive biologistic continuism.[17] Inequality, or even abyssal differences (as Derrida puts it[18]), may be the alternative starting point for ethics and for friendships that prove that the abysses can be bridged, like sharing a moment of pleasure when stroking a cat. Although there is no equality between the subjects involved, there surely is affection and a kind of cooperation leading to mutual pleasure.

So maybe many aspects of the traditional idea of friendship have in fact disappeared, as Herer diagnoses it. But on the other hand, if we turn to more inclusive theories than those created by and for privileged men, friendship can be seen both as an actual and a virtual element which is still present in many ways today. And

---

14) Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* trans. by Alphonso Lingis, (The Hague / Boston / London: Martius Nijhoss Publishers, 1979).

15) Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, (Harvard University Press, August 29, 2016), 164–65.

16) Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* vol. 3, *The Care of the Self,* trans. by Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

17) Matthew Callarco, *Zoographies. The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 166–67.

18) Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow … A Dialogue,* trans. Jeff Fort, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 66.

maybe it can be better preserved if we redeem the idea of individualism, but not in the liberal egoist way, nor the classist fear of "the masses," but in a way that sees protecting one's individuality as a necessary condition of friendship and common action, if they are to keep their transformative power (*puissance*) of an event. Maybe protecting our individuality (by protecting our solitudes) can even be seen as one of the tools to prevent the concentration of power (*pouvoir*), which is more likely in a more rigid community based on loyalty.