Friendship as Community:

From Ethics to Politics by Simon O'Sullivan

The economics of friendship have never, for me, been a straightforward matter. Or to put this differently, the constitution of a community has always been uneven and fraught. Fraught with insecurities and anxieties - with unreasonable desires and unfounded fears (which were less to do with any friends I might or might not have had or have, and more to do with my self; and with the *production* of my own subjectivity). Nevertheless there have been times when friendship - and community, and thus *hospitality* - have been easier (and more present, as it were) than at others. Without going back to childhood - or even to my teenage years (though this would itself be an area worthy of enquiry - for myself at any rate) - I can say that I was involved in a friendship community - if not entirely a scene - constellated around clubbing and the various lifestyles this involved. Friendships here operated across class, gender, and, to a lesser extent, age divisions. Jobs - for those who had them - were equally irrelevant. Although I do not want to sound too utopian, it did seem, looking back, to have been a collective without identity in this molar sense (except of course that we all went clubbing). The intentional and affective community that we produced, although fluid, was also made up from a very strong sense of connectivity - and, as such, a loyalty (one might even say, a fidelity) amongst us all. I remember it also as being particularly *enabling*; it somehow allowed us - as individuals as well as a group - a greater freedom of action in the world.

This particular community, although still in formation in Leeds, England - albeit with different coordination points and a different constitution - is one I am no longer a part of. Nevertheless, many of the friendships - and thus a kind of *intensive* map from those days - remain: friends who make the trip to London - or with whom I reconnect when in Leeds and elsewhere. There are other things that could be said here about our community as it exists now: the importance of communications technology in the maintenance and, in fact, the ongoing constitution of these long distant friendships - or 'distance communities'; the importance of commitment and honesty in making them work; and not least, the importance of a kind of positive regard - or precisely hospitality - expressed in an acceptance of each others' changes and differences.

These last two, and especially the last, are characteristics of good friendships - indeed they call friendship into being; as the saying goes 'to have a good friend one needs first to be a good friend' - a friend in a kind of unconditional sense (which really means recognizing the other as being like oneself (it seems to me that Levinas is right on this point)). In fact one needs to be a friend to oneself first - one needs to accept oneself - before one can accept, and thus befriend others. Friendship, or again hospitality, is then a kind of technology of the self as Foucault might say - a technology of self constitution.

The joyful encounter

Enough of an introduction. What I want to do in this short contribution to the paper is alter the perspective slightly (from cause to effect, as it were) and think a little about friendship in terms of the bearing it has on our being in the world - on our style of life if you like (and ultimately our politics). And I want to do this by following Deleuze's reading of Spinoza (from *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*) which, it seems to me, offers a powerful framework for thinking friendship. In particular it is Spinoza's privileging of the encounter that I want to focus on - and specifically the notion of the joyful encounter. For the *joyful* encounter - the result of two or more bodies meeting that essentially agree with one another - has, for Spinoza, the concomitant effect of increasing our capacity to act in the world. At the same time, and because of this, it also gives us a kind of knowledge - what Spinoza calls the common notions - that will allow us to produce even more of such encounters (and ultimately a kind of super knowledge of cause and effect allowing for a Nietzschean type of self-overcoming).

This is a knowledge that proceeds from the body to consciousness - or really refuses to see the distinction. It is a knowledge that is derived from our being *in* the world - and a knowledge that we arrive at through our *own* lived experience (it is specifically non-theological in this sense). Here the encounter is of utmost ontological importance. Indeed it is the encounter that produces us, if we are to understand ourselves as those *affects* - those risings and fallings, those becomings - that make up our experience. In Spinoza's terminology these encounters are either of the nature of a poison - they disagree with us, producing sad affects - resulting in a reduction our power to act in the world; or they act as a food - they agree with us, producing joyful, or simply happy affects - resulting in an increase in our power to act in the world. We have here, then, a kind of general *toxicity* of the world - a kind of affective cartography. In passing we might note Guattari's theories on the production of subjectivity - as that which is always open to, and in contact with, an outside. Indeed Guattari refers to this processual self creation of ourselves as being akin to chemistry. In a similar mode to Spinoza's geometric method - which precisely involves going beyond appearances and felt affections to their causes, and thus producing the knowledge to alter our make up - Guattari likewise calls for the breakdown of the components of subjectivity which will thus allow for recombinations:

> Just as chemistry had to begin by purifying complex mixtures in order to extract homogeneous atomic and molecular matter, and then to create from them an infinite array of chemical entities that had not existed previously, the 'extraction' and 'separation' of aesthetic subjectivities or partial objects, in the psychoanalytic sense, facilitates an immense complexification of subjectivity, of new and unprecedented existential harmonies, polyphonies, rhythms and orchestration (Guattari 1996, 200).

For Guattari, like Spinoza, it is the encounter - with other things as well as with other beings - that accompanies and in some senses produces this chemical 'knowledge' of subjectivity. Hence the importance of Guattari's *La Borde* clinic - precisely an arena of encounter - where individuals are given access to 'new materials of expression' which allow them access to hitherto unknown universes of reference (Guattari 1995, 7). Equally important is the involvement in what Guattari calls the 'individual-group-machine' - basically, interaction with others which allows for a process of *resingularisation* - in which individuals 'create new modalities of subjectivity in the same way an artist creates new forms from a palette' (Guattari 1995, 7).

Back to Deleuze-Spinoza. To recap:

> ... when we encounter a body that agrees with ours, and has the effect of affecting us with joy, this joy (increase of our power of acting) induces us to form the common notion of these two bodies, that is, to compound their relations and to conceive the unity of composition ... The common notions are an Art, the art of the *Ethics* itself: organising good encounters, composing actual relations, forming powers, experimenting. (Deleuze 1988, 118-19).

We have here then a kind of ethics of experimentation - a practice of producing different combinations in the world. Said more poetically this amounts to treating one's life as a work of art - which is to say one becomes involved in actively *creating* one's own life. This is also to produce a *cartography* of one's life - to map out the different relations of speeds and slowness, to map out the various capacities for affecting and for being affected - to understand ourselves and others as intensive beings. It is in this sense that Deleuze, following Spinoza, calls for a new ethology - understood as that which 'define[s] bodies, animals, or humans by the affects they are capable of.' (Deleuze 1988, 125).

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Ultimately this is to understand the universe as counterpunctual: all things as being everywhere and always in relation to all other things: a world of insubstantiality and interpenetration, a world of *becoming*. On a less abstract level, ethology for us as subjects involves a mapping of our encounters in and with the world. These encounters operate at an individual and sub-individual level (the molecular processes that make up life); but they also operate at a supra-individual level. Indeed it is with such encounters - with other individuals - that we begin to see the real political import of Spinoza's geometric system. Here is Deleuze again:

Heretofore it was only a question of how a particular thing can decompose other things by giving them a relation that is consistent with one of its own, or, on the contrary, how it risks being decomposed by other things. But now it is a question of knowing whether relations (and which ones?) can compound directly to form a new, more 'extensive' relation, or whether capacities can compound directly to constitute a more 'intense' capacity or power. It is no longer a matter of utilisations or captures, but of sociabilities and communities. How do individuals enter into composition with one another in order to form a higher individual, ad infinitum? How can a being take another being into its world, but while preserving or respecting the other's own relations and world? And in this regard, what are the different types of sociabilities for example? What is the difference between the society of human beings and the community of rational beings? (Deleuze 1988, 126).

For Spinoza, at least in Deleuze's reading, there are in fact two distinct forms of modern human sociability: one in which control and organisation is imposed from an outside, precisely the civic state in which men are ruled by their hopes and fears (we might call this a transcendent formation - a projection onto man); and the other - what Deleuze following Spinoza calls the state of reason - in which men freely unite and are joined together through nothing other than their own will. This specifically immanent formation is a community produced on the basis of active feeling - and on the common notions (the commonality of man) that arise from this. In the best cases the first - specifically when it is a democracy - prepares the grounds for the latter, although, I would argue, at some point a radical reorientation is needed - an upheaval - to switch from a transcendent formation to an immanent one (the change cannot be gradual in this sense). It is the latter that is precisely a community of friendships understood here as the ongoing production of joyful encounters - themselves productive of actions in the world *and* productive of knowledge about the world.

And so, with Deleuze's Spinoza we move from ethics to politics - to the formation of human sociability through an understanding of our common condition. Another way of thinking this immanent formation is as a community of Agamben's 'whatever singularities' - the latter understood here as those beings 'devoid of any representable identity' - *homo saccer* - irrelevant to, and disposable by the state - and yet also a threat to that very same mechanism of capture (Agamben 1999, 84.5-86.7). A threat because they do not obey the rules of the state - even as a negative formation. They do not have transcendent coordination points (such a community is in this sense self organising in nature). For Agamben the coming politics will be precisely a struggle between this non-State or common humanity - and the State. We might say between a state constituted by sad passions (by hatred and by guilt) - and a community constituted by joy (by friendship and by self affirmation).

Friendship and the multitude

Others have written on this friendship community also: Alain Badiou, in a return to Marx, calls it simply the *proletariat*. But perhaps best known is the term coined by Hardt and Negri in their inspiring volume *Empire* - namely the 'multitude' - understood as the common productivity of humanity. At the end of that book we get a personification of this multitude - or of what really for Hardt and Negri is an activation - or an *expression* - of the immanent power of the multitude (the 'agent of biopolitical production and resistance to *Empire*' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 411)): the militant or communist. But this communist is not that of the 'sad ascetic of the Third International whose soul was deeply permeated by Soviet state reason, the same way the will of the pope was embedded in the hearts of the Society of Jesus', which is to say, not a sad communist; rather the template is the liberatory and anti-fascist fighters of the twentieth century - we might say those who, like Spinoza himself, orientated themselves everywhere and always against transcendence and whose very *modus operandi* was joy. (Hardt and Negri 2000, 411-412). Interestingly this new militant is further personified at the very end of *Empire* by a Christian saint - though here not an agent of transcendence but precisely an expression of immanence: St Francis of Assisi - a figure who 'discovered the power of a new society' by 'adopting the common condition' - the poverty - of the multitude, who refused the 'instrumental discipline of a nascent capitalism' - instead celebrating a joyous life based precisely on friendship - and on a *community* of friendships which includes all beings. (Hardt and Negri 2000, 413). So the coming community will be one formed of friendships - between each other but equally with the world. It is here that philosophy joins hands with politics but also with ecology. Indeed it is here that philosophy becomes political and ecological - which is to say it leaves the seminar room and becomes a pragmatic system for life.

Friendship: a work in progress

What then of myself and my own friends? Well my friendships - with people - with the world - are a work in progress - and a work that takes place in the world and amongst its inhabitants. For ultimately friendship as community has to be *lived*: one cannot produce Spinoza's common notions without experiencing joy - and one cannot, following Guattari, creatively produce one's subjectivity in isolation from others. If there is to be (as Hardt and Negri amongst others claim) a new society, it is not one that will arrive from 'out there' but one that will emerge from right here - from ourselves working on the stuff of our own lives. As such we might say that this noble *and* revolutionary aim, nothing less than a new communism, begins with something very simple: friendship and the joy that is produced by it.

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