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# Fomenting Friendship

The Politics and Policy of  
Interpersonal Warmth

ANDREA CHANDLER



# Fomenting Friendship

In studies of comparative politics and public policy specifically, interpersonal friendship has been generally regarded as a matter that belongs to the private domain, rather than a site for government intervention. And yet, friendship is inherently political. While friendships can and do evolve spontaneously between individuals, political factors can help to bring people together or drive them apart.

*Fomenting Friendship* examines the ways in which friendship has been perceived in comparative politics, and the barriers to friendship that exist in capitalist society. These barriers, Andrea Chandler contends, have been shaped by government policy. Reviewing the abundant evidence that shows that access to friendship is socially determined, and that a lack of access to friendship disadvantages the individual in numerous ways, Chandler effectively makes the case that government has a role to play in encouraging interpersonal friendship, including calling upon politicians to model friendly and inclusive behaviour in public.

This book is a natural resource for all those looking for answers and best policy practices for encouraging friendship and uncovering unanswered questions about friendship.

**Andrea Chandler** is Professor of Political Science at Carleton University, Canada where she teaches courses in comparative politics, democracy, and politics of Russia and Eastern Europe. A native of Halifax, Nova Scotia (Canada), she has published numerous peer-reviewed articles and books, including *Canada and Eastern Europe, 1945–1991: Meeting in the Middle* (2024) and *Democracy, Gender and Social Policy in Russia: A Wayward Society* (2013).

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# **Fomenting Friendship**

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Interpersonal Warmth

**Andrea Chandler**



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# Introduction

Friendship is not conditioned by nature, and has no apparent goal. It consists in the search for a kindred spirit with whom to share one's experiences, thoughts, and feelings – right down to “sacrificing one's life.” But in order to feel this happiness, one must feed friendship with time, time that is part and parcel of one's own, and only, life.... But there was less and less time for friends.

– Ludmila Ulitskaia, *The Big Green Tent: A Novel*,  
Trans. Polly Gannon. New York: Farrar, Strauss  
and Giroux, 2015, p. 429.

In Ludmila Ulitskaia's novel, *The Big Green Tent*, a group of close university friends find their lives diverging in Vladimir Putin's Russia. As Ulitskaia's passage points out, friendship involves no less than the choice to spend time with people who understand you, who enjoy your company, who remember you fondly. A friend is someone who has time for you, who is sharing a portion of their life with you, should you be so fortunate as to have a friend for life. Ulitskaia's characters, friends from university, find themselves growing apart once they are in the working world. Living in a big city, juggling jobs and hectic lives, it becomes harder to give friendship the time it needs to sustain, even though it is necessary for a meaningful life. Friendship matters – but it is elusive.

The COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to a problem that pre-dated the appearance of the virus: the extent to which many people around the globe feel alone, with few or no people to turn to for companionship. To former US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, social isolation was “an epidemic,” about which he published an influential report in 2023. He wrote, “Loneliness and isolation represent profound threats to our health and well-being.”<sup>1</sup> For the good of their health, he argued, Americans

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should focus more attention to their relationships, and leaders were obliged to facilitate meaningful, broad-based social interactions. Strengthening friendship would play an important role in this process. What was at stake was not only the well-being of the individual, but society as a whole, according to Dr. Murthy:

This Surgeon General’s Advisory shows us how to build more connected lives and a more connected society. If we fail to do so, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being. And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country. Instead of coming together to take on the great challenges before us, we will further retreat to our corners—angry, sick, and alone.<sup>2</sup>

The US surgeon general was not the first to acknowledge that people were hurting because they didn’t have enough healthy social interactions. Following a cross-party commission formed by the late Labour Member of Parliament Jo Cox, the United Kingdom established a government initiative, called the Ministry of Loneliness, to look into the scope of the problem and identify possible policy remedies.<sup>3</sup>

As Dr. Murthy’s report detailed, the appearance of the COVID-19 virus brought increased attention to the pain of social isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic led many states to establish dramatic measures to prevent the spread of infection, including the lockdowns that kept many people at home, cut off from friends, neighbours and co-workers. While countries varied in their public health response, many governments imposed restrictions on the ability of people to travel, get together with people outside of their household, or visit relatives in hospitals or nursing homes. A Canadian study completed in the first few months of lockdowns in the pandemic reported that over a fifth of participants reported that their loneliness had increased and that almost as many reported a deterioration of their mental health.<sup>4</sup> The enforcement of lockdowns drew attention to a reality: that governments are capable of taking actions that can influence the quality of people’s relationships and the quantity of their direct social actions. While this phenomenon was not new, it may have come as a shock for some, especially those who had not experienced a war or major climate disaster in their lifetime. Robert E. Lane coined the phrase “the cold society” to explore the idea that under modern capitalist society, there has been a shift in societies towards more individual values and lower priority on communal institutions. For some, this shift is associated with a lack of interest and empathy for others, a phenomenon that could lead them to favour ruthless political leaders.<sup>5</sup>

While friendship does not necessarily “cure” loneliness, it can provide comfort, support and distraction to the lonely. A study of the politics of

friendship is timely, insofar as many people during COVID felt the loss of regular contact with friends, or even lost friends altogether. But as Judith Butler argued, the losses of the pandemic could provide a moment for society to re-establish their interconnectedness at this shared moment of vulnerability.<sup>6</sup> If government action could impact people's friendships in this way, could the reverse be possible? Could governments take action to encourage friendships among the people who lived within their territory and recognize the development of healthy relationships as a priority for a thriving polity?

This study makes the case that the stimulation of friendship should be an explicit goal of government policy. The work will examine the evidence of benefits that friendship offers to those who enjoy it, as well as the potential harmful effects of being friendless. The literature leaves little doubt that friendship is good for people, but it also provides valuable insight into the lives of those who are invisible to, even ostracized by, their peers. This work calls for conceptualizing friendship as something that governments can aspire to make universal, in a similar way to how governments establish universal old-age pensions or universal education. While governments cannot and should not force anybody to be friends with anyone else, it can provide conditions to improve people's access to friendship and acknowledge that friendship is unequally distributed in capitalist society. People with disabilities, insecure employment or housing, and members of visible minorities on the whole have more difficulties making friends than those who are affluent. To improve access to friendship, political leaders will have to be willing not only to encourage interpersonal contact but to confront the forces that inhibit friendship.

## **What Is Friendship?**

While friendship is a familiar, everyday word, it is nevertheless difficult to define. This is because friendship is often visible and tangible in our everyday lives, but it has a subjective component: some people consider a broad circle of acquaintances to be their friends, while others might define friends as only their most intimate circle.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, friendship is perceived differently in different cultures, and the English word "friend" does not necessarily translate with the same meaning in other languages.<sup>8</sup> Friendship often takes on different forms as one moves from childhood to adulthood to old age.<sup>9</sup> Another difficulty in defining friendship is that friendship is often defined by its results – a relationship that enriches people's lives – rather than the essential features of the relationship itself.<sup>10</sup> Tom Roach even argued that friendship was almost impossible to define precisely due to its total dependence on the perception of each individual person who claims a friend, but it was important to try to do so anyway because of the value that friendship has as a relationship free from coercion.<sup>11</sup>

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Friendship is defined here as a *direct, interpersonal, warm* relationship between two or more people who are not blood relatives. The people who participate in friendship with each other interact with each other on a person-to-person level, whether that be in a face-to-face setting, through electronic contact, or telephone. The people involved have warm feelings for each other and wish each other well. Following Preston King, friendships must involve two-way interaction, but one person may initiate more contacts or provide more support than the other.<sup>12</sup>

People may consider relatives to be friends, and that is their prerogative. There is no need to exclude relatives from the definition of friendship altogether.<sup>13</sup> The main issue is that people may feel bound to their blood relationships in a way that is difficult to escape altogether if the relationship is not friendly. As sociologist Amitai Etzioni argued,

Friendship, for instance is based on open-ended commitments. A nurtures B when B is sick without keeping a registry of time spent or thinking that if A becomes ill, he will “cash in” what he is given, getting an equivalent number of cups of soup or bedside visits from B.<sup>14</sup>

Defining friendship as a warm relationship does not mean it will be conflict-free. In her study of feminist memoirs, Judith Taylor observed that while many authors saw friendship between women as having an emancipatory potential, in practice, they found that it was difficult: friendships were wrought with perceived slights, rifts and disappointments. Friendships cooled off for periods of time before re-kindling.<sup>15</sup> People can feel stress from their friendships, and friendships can end when they are no longer working well.<sup>16</sup> This illustrates that people expect their friends to play a positive role in their lives.

#### **Friendship and Politics**

At first glance, friendship might seem to be a subject that is not political. It has often been seen as a personal choice that belongs to the sphere of private life, not a matter for government to interfere. As Danny Kaplan argued, this view means that non-friendship relationships are prioritized within the study of politics, overlooking the potential political impacts of friendship.<sup>17</sup> For example, friends can introduce members of their circle to new political ideas, and friendship networks can be conduits of communication about political events.<sup>18</sup>

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle provided a starting point for the discussion of friendship and politics, insofar as he saw the two as essentially and logically related within a democracy. Indeed, in Aristotle’s conception of democracy, friendship was one of the key characteristics

that enabled democracy to thrive and be sustained. Democracy was a form of government centred upon the respectful conversation of citizens in a shared effort to determine what was best for the community: Aristotle likened it to a banquet that was enriched by everyone contributing their best: “a feast to which all contribute is better than one supplied at one man’s expense.”<sup>19</sup> The analogy of a banquet implies a friendly gathering among comrades.

The capacity for friendship, argued Aristotle, was the best illustration that an individual could empathize with the needs and longings of another person, and could strive to want the best for that other person as much as one wanted the best for oneself.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, democracy required that individuals be willing to consider the needs of others rather than exclusively one’s own personal goodwill. To be a good democratic citizen required unselfish ethical values, or virtues; through friendship, individuals could practice the kind deeds and intense conversation that would enable a democracy to flourish.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Aristotle considered friendship to be necessary for all but the most solitary of human beings; without it, a person could not live a balanced or a contented life.<sup>22</sup>

However, Aristotle’s notion of friendship and politics contains within itself some contradictions, which echo in the political debates that followed him. In the first place, Aristotle’s gaze is firmly fixed on “free-born men,” who were the citizenry in ancient Athens. He was thus primarily interested in friendship between those who held privilege. What about the need for friendship among women and slaves? In one passage, Aristotle writes that a master and slave can have an amicable relationship that resembles friendship, but he implies that this can only exist if the slave accepts his enslaved status.<sup>23</sup> Whether slaves can befriend other slaves, or women can befriend other women, was of little interest to Aristotle. Indeed, women seem to exist in his world only as wives under the authority of husbands. So while Aristotle implies that everyone needs friends for their happiness, it may be the case that not everybody has access to it, in the same way that not everybody has access to riches. Are some people not worthy of friendship, in Aristotle’s estimation? It is unclear whether friendship is part of a life of the “excellence” he values of the best men, or whether it is inherent to human life. Aristotle hints that there are casual friendships, instrumental friendships, and forms of camaraderie that are varied; he also tells us that there are selfish or mean people who don’t need friends.<sup>24</sup> But if one holds that friendship ought to be accessible to all – or if one believes that a friendship between master and slave that is essentially coerced and therefore cannot exist – then Aristotle isn’t of much help.

Nevertheless, Aristotle’s arguments point the way to incorporation of friendship into the political realm. In the first place, he asserted an

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essential connection between friendship and democracy. For example, he writes,

Sharing is a token of friendship; one does not want to share even a journey with one's enemies. The state aims to consist as far as possible of those who are like an equal, a condition found chiefly among the middle people. And so the best-run constitution is certain to be found in this state.<sup>25</sup>

(By middle people, he means those who are neither very rich, who are prone to greed and corruption, nor the very poor or “dishonoured,” who he thought prone to vice and “petty crime.”) He adds that one of the ways that tyrants try to expand their power is to try to break up friendships and other harmonious communities, an acknowledgement that friendship is a source of strength and power.<sup>26</sup> Aristotle's view of the positive impact of friendship and democracy was reinforced by a study published in 2020, which drew on evidence from 46 countries to show that democracy is more durable when politicians know each other well and have amicable relationships that transcend party lines.<sup>27</sup>

Secondly, Aristotle posits in *The Politics* that the “happiness” of all – which includes factors beyond their material security – ought to be the primary goal and basis for governance.<sup>28</sup> He consistently emphasized that genuine friendship improves people's lives, both in the giving and receiving of friendship.<sup>29</sup>

A critique of Aristotle's notion of friendship is that it was a very rarefied relationship, based on a totally free choice of who to pursue leisure time with. Many relationships don't fall into this category; instead, many friendships develop over time through people who work together or are otherwise in regular face-to-face contact.<sup>30</sup> The ancient Roman philosopher Cicero, who wrote centuries after Aristotle, conceived of it as a relationship that could start as a pair of likeminded people and spread outwards to broader circles of people. Since friendship cultivated kindness and curiosity, virtuous friends could build upon their friendship to extend their kindness to others:

It must be granted that good people feel affection for and seek out other good people as if nature herself created the kinship between them. For there is nothing more eager and greedy than nature for things similar to itself.... But we should be clear that the quality of goodness belongs to all kinds of people. Virtue isn't something inhuman, exclusive or proud, but a force that protects entire nations and looks after their well-being – something it certainly wouldn't do if it shunned the affection of the common people.<sup>31</sup>

While friendship then could build on the shared interests and common traits of two individuals, it need not be defined by privilege. A friendly soul does not classify those who are different as non-friends, it approaches the stranger with a view to finding the good within them. The definition of how we define friendship is important. If we see friendship as available to all, and we see all as equally capable of being a friend, we may approach people with a more open mind to expanding our existing circle of friends.

More recently, sociologist Amitai Etzioni argued that in addition to food, shelter and water, people also need “affection and recognition.”<sup>32</sup> The ability to fulfil those needs varies from society to society, Etzioni argued, and for some people they were more difficult to access than others.<sup>33</sup> Some people have more friendships, others fewer; this disparity is seen by some as a tribute to the effort and character traits of those with many friends. For others, though, popularity is just as likely to be a reward for those with privilege and friendship-deprivation to be a matter of exclusion.<sup>34</sup> If we agree with Etzioni’s assertion that friendship fills a basic need, and we accept that for some people this need is unfulfilled, facilitating friendship can be seen as part of the basic task of government: to work for the common good of all.

Friendship can be transformational; it can change people’s lives, and people’s attitudes towards social hierarchies. As Tom Roach argued, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s illustrated that social networks of gay men were caring for their dying friends in ways that were traditionally considered the preserve of family members.<sup>35</sup> Before his death, the French philosopher, Michel Foucault asserted that simply by being present, socially connected gay people could challenge the traditional family’s claim to an elevated position in society and contribute to greater awareness of the diversity of human relationships.<sup>36</sup> Beginning in the 1970s, as gay and lesbian people became more visible in society, they drew greater public attention to the importance that non-familial relationships could play in people’s lives. Many were estranged from their families of origin and depended on their friendships for mutual aid and intimacy.<sup>37</sup> Drawing on research with participants who identified as LGBTQ, Ray Pahl and Liz Spencer found that the amount of time they spent with their friends had increased and that friends were more frequently sharing the same household. Moreover, this trend in friendship was not necessarily “replacing” family, as participants often had strong ties with their families of origin as well.<sup>38</sup>

## **Methodology of the Study**

This work began as a comprehensive scoping review of the literature relevant to the intersection of friendship, loneliness, politics, and policy. Using a variety of library keyword searches and social science databases,

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a large body of references were collected from disciplines including political science, psychology, sociology, social work, economics, business, and social work. The author also examined newspaper and web-based articles, especially for evidence of local pilot projects aimed at breaking down social isolation. Relevant source material was also found in classic texts from political philosophy and comparative politics, as well as government documents and reports from international organizations.

In analysing this material, the author was guided by a set of open-ended questions:

- 1 What is friendship, and is there a common definition used by those who research it?
- 2 How has friendship been regarded in political science, particularly in the subfield of comparative politics? (Comparative politics involves the study of politics within states, and the contrasts in internal political dynamics across states).
- 3 What does the available evidence tell us about the impacts of political factors upon friendships?
- 4 What are the causes and consequences of situations where people have few or no friends?
- 5 What efforts have governments made to encourage (or conversely, to inhibit) friendships among their citizens?

The research identified gaps in our understanding of friendship and politics. To date, governments have been more likely to develop policies to contain loneliness than to encourage friendship. While there may be much congruence in those two endeavours, the difference is that loneliness is a feeling within one person's mind, while friendship is a concrete relationship involving action of two or more people. Therefore, this study will argue that encouraging friendship can, and should, be a policy goal in itself. A further caveat is that while various policies to address loneliness have been attempted, there is as yet little specific literature on which measures work well, and which ones might be less effective. It is worth the effort to pursue the policies that might make a positive difference to people's lives, even if it will be a long process to discover best practices.

### **How the Chapters Will Unfold: Key Arguments**

Chapter 1 will examine the ways in which social isolation and friendship have been examined in comparative politics, the study of internal politics and government within states. Friendship remains a relatively understudied concept, even though the consequences of social isolation and loneliness have been underpinning the discipline for well over a century. Placing friendship explicitly within the realm of comparative politics will enable

new thinking about the role that government can play in encouraging friendship and the potential benefits this might have for democracy.

Chapter 2 will explore the nature and definition of friendship, and discuss the evidence that supports the positive impacts of friendship for the individual and for society as a whole. This makes the encouragement of friendship a desirable goal of public policy.

Chapter 3 will explore the problematic side of friendship: the potential for exclusion, ostracism and isolation. When friendship networks leave people out, whether inadvertently by ignoring them or more intentionally by shunning them, this has an adverse effect on those people. Since Chapter 2 discusses the benefits of friendship, it follows that the friendless do not attain those benefits. Furthermore, friendship is political insofar as it is less accessible to people who are unconventional, disabled, materially deprived, or over-worked. A policy to encourage friendship should attempt to establish a friendship that is universal or accessible to all, as a citizenship right.

In addition to government taking steps to encourage friendship, governments should also address the forces that erode and undermine existing relationships. This will be the focus of Chapter 4. Social scientists have been writing since the nineteenth century about these forces, which include the expansion of capitalism, international and internal migration, automobile culture, and precarious employment. These trends may create distance between people, which makes it difficult to uphold friendships (space) and makes it difficult for people to prioritize friendships given work and family responsibilities (time).

Chapter 5 examines what is known about how friendships can be built. The chapter will ponder the extent to which friendship-building measures can be built through small policy steps, as opposed to larger sociopolitical transformation. Finally, the study will consider the role that politicians can play in either modelling friendliness or stoking division and suspicion among people.

In considering friendship in the twenty-first century, the role of social media in influencing social relationships is a theme that will recur throughout various chapters. This question is a matter of considerable debate, which cannot easily be resolved with a simple answer. The evidence is quite mixed and much depends on the context of the social interaction. Certainly, social media enables hostile, reactive communication and cyber-bullying, which are antithetical to friendship as defined by this study. Exposure to toxic discourse on social media has been linked to feelings of pessimism and powerlessness about politics.<sup>39</sup> If people allow casual social media contact to replace face-to-face personal interaction, that can deprive both them and their friends of the benefits of intimacy. But studies show that social media can complement and enhance existing friendships, rather than dilute them,<sup>40</sup> and can create new opportunities to build political movements.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, research carried out during the

COVID-19 pandemic indicated that friendships pursued online were often perceived to be beneficial to participants' mental health and to enable them to pursue lives that were as normal as possible during lockdowns. Yet some people found that it was difficult to keep up with friends online during the pandemic, and their friendships suffered as a result.<sup>42</sup>

### **What Is at Stake?**

In recent years, political scientists have often called for greater civility in politics, raising concerns that political polarization is dividing people into opposing camps. Not infrequently, they posit declining interpersonal interactions as a factor behind the divisiveness of contemporary democracy.<sup>43</sup> The re-election of Donald Trump in the United States in 2024 demonstrates that there is an urgent need for attention to friendship and politics. During his previous presidency, relationships suffered, as many people who voted Democrat broke off contact with friends and family who voted for Trump.<sup>44</sup> An exploration of the relationship between friendship and politics will require attention to big questions: what is government for, and what can it do? What *should* government do, and what should it not attempt? How do we determine whether a policy works well? These are difficult questions, where reasonable people may disagree. Nevertheless, a study of friendship and politics can proceed from two well-grounded assumptions. First, few people would dispute that a politics based on dialogue and mutual respect (such as can be found within friendship) is preferable to a politics based on subordination and violence. Second, in liberal democracies, the welfare state provides an important shock absorber in times of individual vulnerability or dramatic change. While the welfare state has been much challenged in recent years by fiscal conservatives, it continues to function as a safety net to offset individual vulnerability. Could we expand our notion of the welfare state to include the building of friendship relations between citizens? That question is at the centre of this inquiry.

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# 1 Friendship and Comparative Politics

Comparative politics is a problem-driven discipline: it has been interested in questions such as why do revolutions happen, how are sustainable democracies built, and which kind of political system best supports economic prosperity. After World War II, the emergent subfield of comparative politics explored such questions in an effort to establish a scientifically grounded examination of the internal political dynamics within states. Among the tasks of comparative politics were to explore further the connections between individual insecurity, social exclusion, and political turmoil. Thinkers from a variety of disciplines, including Hannah Arendt and Reinhold Niebuhr, had called attention to these themes.<sup>1</sup> And yet, the idea that there were concrete steps that a government could take to encourage warm social interactions was rarely considered. A more comprehensive welfare state was envisaged that would improve people's lives – but the welfare state was about supporting individuals and enabling consumer purchases – not building interpersonal relationships.

In the early decades after World War II, comparative politics showed ambivalence about the role of interpersonal friendships in political life. To some extent, this ambivalence reflected doubts about whether something as private and personal as friendship was even a political subject, rather than a matter for psychologists and sociologists to explore. And yet, on other topics, comparative politics intersected frequently with other disciplines, among them anthropology, sociology, and political psychology. As this chapter will demonstrate, comparative politics did, in a variety of ways, identify the theme of friendship as relevant to the political sphere. However, major comparativists by and large did not explicitly acknowledge the ways in which interpersonal friendship could scaffold a healthy democracy. Over time, especially from the 1990s onwards, this theme was acknowledged by scholars such as Robert Putnam and Amitai Etzioni. And the idea that a democratic polity could, or should, encourage interpersonal friendships as a policy to improve the public good – that idea is still in its infancy.

In comparative politics, foundational thinkers grappled with what they saw as a transition from a more traditional and rural society to a modern capitalist one. Sociologists played a crucial role in spurring a study of politics that was focussed less on institutions and more on path-dependent processes. Early comparative politics was preoccupied with two dependent variables: transformation and stability, to coexist in an uneasy balance. A key feature of this transition was the transformation of interpersonal relationships, frequently depicted in terms of a loss of quotidian intimacy. The transformation of interpersonal relationships was accepted as a given, but scholars had differing views on the nature and significance of this interpersonal transformation.

### **Identifying the Problem of Loneliness: Durkheim, Tönnies, Arendt**

A key preoccupation of comparative politics from 1945 onwards was the challenge of modernization: how to ensure that the process of capitalist economic modernization occurred in a way that met social needs and maintained a polity that was capable of sustaining change without violent upheaval. Since the late 1800s, it had been acknowledged that industrial development unravelled, or even destroyed, interpersonal relationships.

In the late nineteenth century, Ferdinand Tönnies described this transition as one of *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* was based on a strong network of interpersonal relationships within a community. Tönnies describes these rich relationships as having various sources: first, communities shared resources, including land, in common and depended on each other's help and cooperation; second, neighbours, worshippers at the same church, and people who worked alongside each other spent large amounts of time together, and this facilitated friendship through familiarity and shared experiences; third, people might establish friendships based on shared interests or artistic pursuits.<sup>2</sup> Friendship thrived, he wrote, when people *talk to each other often* and over time, develop conventions and rules about how to manage situations and work out problems.<sup>3</sup> This theme of *talk* raises a connection between friendship and democracy: decades later, Karl Mannheim described "a faith in the all-healing virtue of free discussion" as one of the key features of democracy: the word choice suggests not only that disputes could be resolved peacefully but also that it would alleviate or prevent rifts between people.<sup>4</sup>

In *Gesellschaft*, as the power of capital and the state increased, Tönnies posited that interpersonal relationships weaken because people have left these communities and the people/conventions within them. In their new industrial settings, people have trouble establishing new, close interpersonal relationships because there is more competition and rivalry. Furthermore,

there was no joint property, so there were fewer regular opportunities for joint decisions, and people were expected to comply with rules without understanding the original basis for those rules and without participating in the making of those rules. Rules were based on law, regular workers felt they had no part in creating, even if they were the result of deliberation by elected assemblies. People with modest incomes could still make friends with each other, but they had to work harder at it, as there were few public spaces open to them other than “saloons.”<sup>5</sup> Tönnies observed that *Gesellschaft* is vulnerable to disruption, even violence, because people see little stake in following the rules and they become “worn down” by work.<sup>6</sup>

Tönnies actually suggested that *government action* could support friendship:

In the end it will probably realize that no increase in knowledge and culture alone will make people kinder, less egotistical and more content and that dead folkways, mores and religions cannot be revived by coercion and teaching. The state will then arrive at the conclusion that in order to create moral forces and moral beings it must prepare the ground and fulfill the necessary conditions, or at least it must eliminate counteracting forces. The state, as the reason of *Gesellschaft*, should decide to destroy *Gesellschaft*, or at least to reform or renew it. The success of such attempts is highly improbable.<sup>7</sup>

However, Tönnies thought that educated and artistic people could revive the best parts of *Gemeinschaft*.

This theme of social disruption was also explored by a contemporary of Tönnies, French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who innovated an empirical approach based on comparative analysis of social data. In his work *On Suicide*, Durkheim wrote of the traumatic effects of socioeconomic change on individuals. Those who were compelled to migrate away from their social support networks in search of work became deeply unsettled and isolated in their new surroundings. He called this social isolation “*anomie*,” and argued that the presence of *anomie* explained increased rates of suicide in industrializing areas of Europe.<sup>8</sup> Durkheim observed that unmarried people, widows and widowers, and people from small families were more prone to suicide than married people with strong family networks. Furthermore, those who were unmarried included many people who were disabled, impoverished or scarred – such individuals were perceived as undesirable marriage partners.<sup>9</sup> In this environment, people with few or no social supports, with little guidance on how to cope with sudden events, people could readily become depressed and withdrawn.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Tönnies, Durkheim was sceptical that government could play a useful role in counteracting social isolation:

[The state] is a clumsy machine, designed only for general and simple tasks; its activity is always uniform and cannot bend to the infinite diversity of particular circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, civil society, in particular occupational or professional associations, could play a valuable role in providing community for their members.<sup>12</sup> Forty-five years after Durkheim published *On Suicide*, American sociologist Talcott Parsons argued that the *anomie* described by Durkheim was one of the factors that contributed to fascism: people who had trouble adjusting to social change might see nationalism as a movement that provided some structure and a sense of belonging.<sup>13</sup> But this observation re-frames *anomie* as an emotional response to (and an implied reaction against) processes of change. By contrast, Durkheim saw *anomie* as a kind of grief for lost interpersonal relationships. Despite his admiration of Durkheim, Parsons was equivocal about the importance of friendship to modern society, as will be discussed below.

Another key influence on comparative politics was the political philosopher Hannah Arendt. In her work on totalitarianism, Arendt wrote that extreme, repressive regimes (notably Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin) exploit and intensify the atomization of society. Above all, what such regimes seek to destroy is the interpersonal connections between people within a society, as such connections lead to unpredictable and independent actions.<sup>14</sup> Arendt here made a crucial point: that human freedom means the freedom to establish and maintain one's own interpersonal relationships. Democracy and friendship, it follows, are inseparable; the weakening of friendships can threaten democracy:

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century.<sup>15</sup>

Echoing Durkheim and Tönnies, Arendt argued that modernity creates the conditions for loneliness; as people migrate to industrial settings, they may start to feel unnecessary and unnoticed. Furthermore, they may become disoriented and rudderless when their understandings about how the world works no longer hold and when they lack the company of other people, which might help them to feel grounded in new realities.<sup>16</sup> This situation is potentially dangerous, as people may come to doubt whether their old views of right and wrong are valid, potentially weakening their resistance to cruel and aggressive forms of politics. She called for a politics based on compassion, solidarity, and an appreciation of the preciousness of every human life:

It is out of pity that men are “attracted toward *les hommes faibles*,” but it is out of solidarity that they establish deliberately and, as it were, dispassionately a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited. The common interest would then be “the grandeur of man,” or “the honour of the human race,” or the dignity of man. For solidarity, because it partakes of reason, and hence of generality, is able to comprehend a multitude of conceptually, not only the multitude of a class or nation of people, but eventually all mankind.... Solidarity is a principle that can inspire and guide action.<sup>17</sup>

Using an approach very different from Arendt’s, Teodor Adorno (of the Frankfurt School of progressive philosophers) also interrogated the question of why people become fascists. The result was a large-scale, multi-researcher study, *The Authoritarian Personality*, which sought to uncover personality traits of people who leaned towards authoritarian sympathies. While social isolation could be found in such individuals, what was more prominent was their upbringing in strict, controlling families. Adorno speculated that such traits were not indelible features of a person’s character but rather could be mitigated by an inclusive education system.<sup>18</sup>

### **Reframing the Problem: The Downgrading of the Interpersonal Realm**

Other key pioneers in comparative politics discussed friendship in terms of its potential negative impacts on politics, as in the context of corruption and clientelism. In “Politics as a Vocation,” German sociologist Max Weber, like his contemporaries Durkheim and Tönnies, was interested in the transition from traditional to modern society. One of the features of a traditional society was that friends and family members of the ruler gained special privileges and rewards. People outside these elite circles were compelled simply to accept that this was the way things were and would continue to be (what Weber called the “eternal yesterday.”) This type of society, based on arbitrary rule, was incompatible with a rational order progressing towards a more sophisticated economy. By contrast, in a modern society, government officials had professional training and ethics, and were obliged to treat all people equally under law. In the interim state between the two, “charismatic authority,” the authoritarian leader also relies on distributing rewards to loyal friends and supporters. So friendship received Weber’s attention in the context of the temptation for leaders to favour their friends, an unfair and regressive state of affairs.<sup>19</sup>

Weber’s intention was not to put down friendship *per se*. Rather, it was to expose a characteristic of pre-modern leaders: their reliance on oppression and conquest as a method of rule depended on granting largesse to those who upheld their position of power. Weber thus established corruption as a logical component of any authoritarian regime, whether it was

the medieval kingdom or the more recent “charismatic” regime, based on the supposed exalted position of the leader. The unbiased nature of the modern system was not supposed to be based on a disregard for interpersonal fellowship but rather a sense of fairness to those who do not have access to the inner echelons of power. Curbing abuses of power, rather than extending the circles of friendship, were Weber’s primary interest. But for some of the comparativists who came after Weber – notably Talcott Parsons – there was a scepticism towards friendship in general.

***Talcott Parsons: Friendship as Obstacle to Efficiency and Stability***

Talcott Parsons’ work was a key influence in comparative politics because of his desire to categorize societies as being systems composed of entities and hierarchies (structures) that organize and execute consistent activities (functions). The interaction and the consistency of these functions ensures the continuity of the system. It was valuable in comparative politics because it was a way of seeing that societies could be different but nonetheless be comparable and stable. A stable society was one that could generally satisfy people’s needs, including their need for positive contact with other people, and manage change in a healthy and predictable way.<sup>20</sup> There was a process of change towards a “universal-achievement” society, which Parsons argues inclines towards democracy because in the achievement ethos, people expect their leaders to deliver results.<sup>21</sup> Democracy, then, was not really imagined as a friendship-oriented process here.

A challenge for Parsons was that friendship is a difficult subject to research. Talcott Parsons, in his work *The Social System*, referred to friendship as a “penumbra” – a term used to describe scientific phenomena that are only partially visible.<sup>22</sup> Parsons’ work shows a certain discomfort with friendship, a relationship that does not really fit into his endeavour to describe a society as consisting of particular structures that fulfil specific roles. This is partly a methodological problem – a difficulty determining what it is that friendship does in modern society. Indeed, Parsons locates friendship as primarily fulfilling the function of “recreation or entertainment,”<sup>23</sup> as opposed to family relationships, which may provide enjoyment or fulfilment but also where people are duty-bound to assist and care for each other in their daily lives.<sup>24</sup>

But there was a scepticism towards the usefulness of friendship in twentieth-century life. The modern society, for Parsons, was moving away from a traditional society, where personal relationships determine the application of rules and the distribution of resources – towards what he calls a “universalist-achievement” society, where people are treated equally and succeed on merit. Interpersonal relationships can actually get in the

way of this process of forming a modern society: “too close ties of community solidarity” can be a “serious threat.”<sup>25</sup> In Parsons’ view, it could impede people’s ability to be productive, to have ambition, and to prioritize their own advancement.<sup>26</sup> While it is fine for men to socialize casually at work or at the neighbourhood barbecue, for Parsons, men are well advised to keep their focus on work and family. In modern society, time matters; men are expected to get things done efficiently.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, later in the book, Parsons refers in passing to a potential “danger” in close friendships among members of the same sex, especially if they physically touch each other’s bodies.<sup>28</sup> He argues for the importance of socializing children for “normal adult sexuality,” which helps to sustain the social system. This “normal adult sexuality” includes not just heterosexual sex but also strictly defined gender roles (men as employed breadwinners, women as wives and mothers).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, in a rare mention of the so-called “problem of homosexuality,” Parsons regards the problem as not only one of same-sex relationships but of people not conforming to expected gender roles.<sup>30</sup> Parsons showed no particular interest in friendship between women, which may explain why he had trouble seeing friendship’s value. Even if women were the housewives and mothers that he assumed that they were, they might have been spending time together minding each other’s children, sharing work as school volunteers, shovelling snow for elderly neighbours, or joining carpools. Indeed, Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach argued that female friendship often arises through shared unpaid work, such as organizing community events and preparing food for large gatherings.<sup>31</sup>

Parsons’ “universal-achievement” society then was strictly patriarchal. Career achievement was for men. Relationships were necessary, but heterosexual relationships that lead to the raising of children were privileged over all other interpersonal ties. Procreative relationships were considered useful, because they performed a clear function but also provided a sense of order and stability in society. Parsons’ focus was clearly on the heterosexual, married nuclear family of the 1950s, with a breadwinner. His gaze did not fall upon widowed people, single parents, people with no living family members, childless couples, gay or lesbian people, people with disabilities, or people who never married. Friendship may fulfil a very different role in the lives of members of those groups than what Parsons described.

### **Reframing the Problem: The Displaced and Disenchanted as Political Threat**

One of the leading figures of comparative politics in the United States was Gabriel Almond, co-author of *The Civic Culture*, a multi-country study

that sought to identify the cultural factors associated with a propensity for liberal democracy. Years before *The Civic Culture* appeared in print, Almond published *The Appeals of Communism* (1954). In this work, he sought to identify the factors that might attract one to join left-wing political parties, interviewing present and former Communist party members. Unlike Adorno, Almond made little effort to distinguish extremist or anti-democratic tendencies from sympathies for a more progressive version of capitalism; instead, his assumption seemed to be that left-wing political organizations constituted a Communist threat to democracy.

Almond distilled from his interviews a sort of personality profile of the American Communist: this individual had a propensity to be “bookish,” introverted, self-conscious, and resentful:

The problems of interpersonal relationships most commonly manifested among the former Communist respondents were hostility and withdrawal; in other words, there was a relatively high incidence of people who were poorly related to others and their surroundings.<sup>32</sup>

For these individuals, whom Almond labelled as “neurotic,” Communist movements might be an attractive source of companionship.<sup>33</sup> Almond’s depiction of Communists as “neurotic” was dismissed by Sidney Hook, a contemporary of Almond’s, who deemed it unscientific, as Almond had failed to prove that Communists were any more likely to be neurotic than anyone else, nor to suggest other ways that people might cope with isolation and self-doubt besides joining a Communist group.<sup>34</sup> Almond suggested vaguely that some form of government social assistance should be considered so that communism would be less appealing but doesn’t specify how this policy might address the need for interpersonal contact that lonely would-be Communists faced.

Alarmingly, Almond depicted Communists as *the other*, writing that “the Negro, the Jew, the foreign-born and the first-generation born, the unemployed, the native intellectual in a colonial country” might be drawn to communism: not because they were discriminated against or oppressed, but because of individual shortcomings: they were “withdrawn” and have difficulty adjusting to mainstream society.<sup>35</sup> So although Almond had an opportunity here to observe that marginalized, stigmatized people might be drawn to social justice movements, instead he reinforced the labelling of introverts, immigrants, and minority groups as potential threats to democracy.

In the 1960s, society’s outcasts and misfits came to represent another kind of threat. In a 1963 article, Mancur J. Olson observed that such individuals could be lured into violent insurrections:

Rapid economic growth...loosens the class and caste ties that can help bind men to the social order.... Similarly, modern business institutions are bound to weaken or even to destroy the tribe, the manor, the guild, and the rural village. The uprooted souls torn or enticed out of these groups by economic growth are naturally susceptible to the temptations of revolutionary agitation.<sup>36</sup>

Olson was correct in drawing attention to the ways in which economic development was threatening people's livelihoods and affecting interpersonal relationships. Decades before the neoliberal austerity policies of the 1980s and 1990s came under attack, Olson observed that growth in itself was not necessarily good for society; much depended on who received the benefits of that growth. Furthermore, he argued that those who had acquired sudden wealth were just as likely (if not more so) as the newly disadvantaged to want to overthrow the *status quo* in order to lock in a new order that gave them the maximum benefit.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, there were two problems in Olson's article: first, he poorly distinguished social dislocation (a need to find a new home) from social isolation (a decline in the quality and quantity of interpersonal interactions), thereby suggesting that the people in question were primarily affected by dispossession rather than by loneliness. Secondly, to regard *anomic* individuals as potential extremists ran the risk of stereotyping and stigmatizing socially isolated individuals who live quiet, peaceful lives. Consider the following quotation:

The man who has been tempted away from his village, his manor, his tribe, or his family, by the higher wages of burgeoning urban industry may well be a disaffected gainer from economic growth. He has been, albeit voluntarily, uprooted and is not apt soon to acquire comparable social connections in the city. He is therefore prone to join destabilizing mass movements.<sup>38</sup>

This seems a leap of logic. Why would such a person be more likely to join a revolutionary movement rather than, say, become active in a trade union, become a member of a church congregation, or find a pub frequented by co-workers? Why would it be assumed that such a person seeks to join a goal-oriented organization rather than simply seek rest and shelter after long hours of work? In order to test such assumptions, one would need to do a large study of socially isolated people alongside a control group of non-isolated people in order to determine whether the first group was more likely to turn to violence than the second. The methodological – and indeed the ethical – challenges of such a study make it obvious why such research hasn't been done.

***Marx and Friendship***

The idea that communism attracts the lonely looking for friends is intriguing insofar as in the works of the most influential socialist thinkers, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the theme of friendship was seldom addressed. The heart of Marx's theory is the notion that there is inevitable conflict between workers and owners (capitalists), so animosity and enmity is a feature of life under capitalism. This struggle is bad for society, in particular the workers; only their unification in common cause would resolve these tensions by overthrowing capitalism. So Marx posited here the causal relationship between social conflict and revolution, which means that there ought to be a causal relationship between social cooperation and prosperity – which would presumably exist after the revolution. Having atomized workers into separate individuals, those individuals would need to come together in order to overthrow oppression:

Political emancipation is a reduction of man, on the one hand to a member of civil society, an *independent* and *egoistic* individual, and on the other hand to a *citizen*, a moral person.... Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen, when an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work and his relationships, has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (*forces progress*) as *social* powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as a *political power*.<sup>39</sup>

Little is elaborated, though, about the interpersonal relationships between workers that would create a more equitable order or how those relationships could be restored once the divisiveness of capitalism was overturned. (This theme will be revisited in Chapter 4).

**Political “Uprootedness” as Dependent Variable of Political Forces: Barrington Moore, Karl Deutsch, Mancur Olson**

In the 1960s, some comparativists returned to the problem of disrupted interpersonal relationships without blaming the individuals who experienced social isolation. They went further than Durkheim, however, insofar as they highlighted that these broken relationships were not simply the result of a voluntary migration in search of work but had been abruptly transformed by changes in the political arena. In *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Barrington Moore observed that in England and France, laws enabled lands previously accessible to peasants to be fenced-off by landowners, denying them the means of subsistence, a

process that Moore describe as “massive violence exercised by the upper classes against the lower.”<sup>40</sup> This violence severely weakened “the network of social relationships based on the division of labour that in effect *was* the society of the village.”<sup>41</sup> It was because of this shock that many parents left rural homes to work in industry or had to search for casual work on larger farms. In France, this process of displacement led to peasant violence.<sup>42</sup> Moore therefore established that the erosion of interpersonal relationship could have both causes and effects that were political.

Another comparativist, Karl Deutsch, also acknowledged the losses that could occur with modernization:

For the uprooted, impoverished and disoriented masses produced by social mobilization, it is surely untrue that government is best that governs least. They are far more likely to need a direct transition from traditional government to the essentials of a modern welfare state.<sup>43</sup>

Deutsch’s primary focus in his 1961 article was on the need for government to prioritize establishing a social safety net to establish income security, health, and education programmes. But unlike some of his colleagues who downplayed the masses’ need for social connection, Deutsch argued that trade union membership and organized groups in civil society might provide a sense of security and empowerment for people who had lost access to direct person-to-person intimate relationships. This nominally “political” activity could advance social integration rather than constitute a threat; the masses could endanger political stability only if they felt excluded from the political community and the opportunities therein.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, sociologist Amitai Etzioni argued that trade unions were an important means for workers to gain a sense of inclusion in a society where the wealthier classes overlooked or even feared them.<sup>45</sup>

Deutsch’s theses on social mobilization and modernization received less scholarly attention than the book published seven years later on a similar theme by Samuel P. Huntington. Huntington was able to acknowledge the relationship losses that came with modernization, but his work suggests that the gap in the social fabric could be addressed through the state and other organized political institutions:

In a simple society community is found in the immediate relation of one person to another: husband to wife, brother to brother, neighbour to neighbour. The obligation and the community are direct; nothing intrudes from the outside. In a more complex society, however, community involves the relation of individual men or groups to something apart from themselves. The obligation is to some principle, tradition, myth, purpose or code of behaviour that the persons or groups have in common.... For attitudes must be reflected in behaviour, and community

involves not just any “coming together,” but rather a regularized, stable and sustained coming together. And the coming together must, in short, be institutionalized.<sup>46</sup>

Was Huntington implying that interpersonal relationships need to be controlled? Probably not all relationships, but it sounds like he is hinting that an unplanned process of people “coming together” could get in the way of stable nation-building. Later in the book, Huntington again shows ambivalence about interpersonal relationships, acknowledging that in modernization, interpersonal relationships are broken up but suggesting that this might not be a bad thing:

[S]ocial mobilization, in Deutsch’s formulation, is the process by which major clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behaviour.<sup>47</sup>

Are these new patterns to mean new networks of interpersonal relationships? Perhaps. Huntington didn’t say. Instead, he claimed that people move from local and familial “loyalties and identifications” to “larger and more impersonal groupings (such as class and nation).”<sup>48</sup> The reader is left uncertain whether Huntington thought the impersonal should *replace* the interpersonal. Perhaps not, but by phrasing interpersonal relationships as “loyalties and identifications,” Huntington seemed to be overlooking the affective and material benefits that come from interpersonal relationships, the companionship and mutual help that are missed when they are lost. And if people become available for new relationships, but access to new relationships don’t present themselves in the circumstances in which people find themselves in, they may become alone and vulnerable in the way that Durkheim discussed.

In fairness to Huntington, he wrote extensively about the pitfalls of corruption, which in his view was primarily a phenomenon of favouritism towards one’s friends<sup>49</sup> (echoing a theme of Weber, discussed earlier). And it is clear that Huntington valued the importance of some kind of solidarity: he wrote, “In the absence of social conflict, political institutions are unnecessary; in the absence of social harmony, they are impossible.”<sup>50</sup> What did he mean by social harmony though? What was missing from Huntington’s account was an explanation of how a stable, mature political community could include, even encourage, broad-based interpersonal friendships. If friendship was only discussed in contexts where it was considered unhealthy, such as corruption, the risk would be that comparative politics would overlook healthy friendships at best and be mistrustful of them at worst.

This blind spot can be seen in an influential chapter by Gabriel A. Almond published in 1960, in an edited volume produced by members of

the Political Development School of Comparative Politics. Almond cast friendship in the role of an obstacle to healthy political development: friendship groups could lead to clientelism, or “cliques,” in which informal groups of associates could offer each other preferential treatment or exert undue influence in a way that was not transparent. Such cliques were associated with authoritarianism and corruption, not with a law-based democracy.<sup>51</sup> No constructive role for friendship was mentioned. Five years later, Almond co-edited an influential book, *The Civic Culture*, with his colleague Sidney Verba, which was a comparative study exploring whether people’s attitudes towards their social interactions were correlated with democratic stability. While friendship would seem to be a vital area to cover in such a scholarly endeavour, Almond and Verba did not focus on this: they were more interested in people’s public interactions, not with the quality or intimacy of those interactions.<sup>52</sup> In her critique of *The Civic Culture*, Carole Pateman criticized the authors for focussing on citizens’ participation in organizations outside the home, without considering or commenting upon the barriers that might exist for some people to participate in those interactions:

The development of a democratic political culture demands, in short, a radical restructuring of all aspects of the organizations and associations of everyday life to provide opportunities for worthwhile participation for all citizens.<sup>53</sup>

### **Proxies of the Interpersonal Realm: Integration, Nationalism, Civil Society**

Another member of the Political Development School, Leonard Binder, went even further than Huntington, insofar as he denounced those (whom he did not name) who advocated the preservation of “small *gemeinschaftlich* communities,” calling those advocates “romantic.”<sup>54</sup> (There is no logical reason why one could not still have networks of familiarity and intimacy within a law-based, rationally organized polity – what Tönnies argued was that it was difficult to maintain *Gemeinschaft* in the face of the pressures of modernization, not that the two were incompatible with each other). Binder acknowledged that modernization eroded interpersonal relationships and took people away from their communities; however, he argued that the *anomie* associated with modernization were a temporary phenomenon that would pass:

[W]hen viewed in the context of what are perceived to be the insistent and rigid collectivist struggle of a traditional order, social atomization appears as a desirable attainment of individual freedom and equality, while alienation seems to be relevant only to the traditional order and not to society in general.<sup>55</sup>

Binder provided no details or references to elaborate this claim. The solution to this problem of social breakdown was “integration,” a vaguely defined general process of creating a society that functioned well and adapted to social change. This integration process would include the availability of organized social groups, based on people who shared professional ties or had common pastimes, that would enable “persons that have similar interests to know one another.” Integration, then, was a proxy for friendship.<sup>56</sup> But Binder did not consider in the text the difficulties some people might have in finding or joining these organized groups. These difficulties, to be discussed in Chapter 3, could include a lack of time, precarious housing or employment, and disability.

Another proxy for friendship came from democratic theorist John Rawls, who argued that a democratic society could be based on “civic friendship,” meaning a sense of having a shared community based on the ideal of justice:

Among individuals with disparate aims a purposes a shared conception of justice establishes the bonds of civic friendship; the general desire for justice limits the pursuit of other ends.<sup>57</sup>

This civic friendship can be based on shared principles but also on shared experiences as equal members of the same nation.<sup>58</sup> It echoes the way in which international relations uses the metaphor of friendship to describe the ideal of peaceful nations seeking harmonious, mutually beneficial relationships.<sup>59</sup>

But “civic friendship” in this context is a metaphor, referring to a pleasant feeling of being in a society with like-minded people. Such a feeling may bring a sense of security or of validation. This sense of safety in numbers may be important to those who share it and may even sustain democracy. It does not in itself connote an interpersonal relationship with specific individuals; it is rather a proxy, a substitute, for friendship. One can enjoy the benefits of citizenship but still be a lonely citizen. Justice may be a comfort, but you cannot borrow a cup of sugar from justice, nor will it accompany you to the cinema.

Still another proxy for friendship is nationalism, what Benedict Anderson called the “imagined community.” As the modern political society evolved, inventions such as mass newspaper publishing enabled the development of a shared sense of nationhood, where members of a political entity developed common understandings of their relationship with each other in a larger whole.<sup>60</sup> They developed a sense of participating in the same events at the same time, and that they were members of the same community. The key though was that this community was “imagined” – people did not actually know all of their fellow nationals and did not interact with them.<sup>61</sup> Although the national myths might use the language

of friendship or brotherhood (“comradeship” is the word Anderson used),<sup>62</sup> this was a simulated relationship – again, a *feeling* of belonging – rather than a real interpersonal connection.

Of course, feelings of belonging to a nation may provide comfort and solace to an individual, may stir pride, and certainly can build political movements. This, not friendship, was Anderson’s focus. And Anderson never claimed that nationalism could replace friendship, nor did he explicitly examine lost relationships. But the point is, feelings of being part of a collective are not a substitute for the real thing (Chapter 2 will discuss the evidence basis of what we know about what friendship means to people).

For Ernest Gellner, nationalism also builds upon what he called “*entropy*” – the dislocation and sense of “uprootedness” that accompanies industrialization.<sup>63</sup> Modernization impacts the fact that “local communities depend for their functioning on a good measure of face-to-face contact.” Nationalism can appeal to the uprooted because it lends credence to their sense of grievance while also promising to simulate the “*folk culture*” that they have lost.<sup>64</sup>

Gellner described graphically these people uprooted from rural communities:

[T]he illiterate, half-starved populations sucked from their erstwhile rural cultural ghettos into the melting pots of shanty-towns yearn for incorporation into some one of those cultural pools which already has, or looks as if it might acquire, a state of its own, with the subsequent promise of full cultural citizenship, access to primary schools, employment and all... They will hesitate about trying to enter cultural pools within which they know themselves to be spurned; or rather, within which they expect to *continue* to be spurned. Poor newcomers are, of course, almost always spurned. The question is whether they will continue to be slighted, and whether the same fate will await their children.<sup>65</sup>

Despite passages such as this, Gellner focussed on the peasants’ loss of *culture*, not their loss of *relationships*.

In short, while various leading comparative politics scholars acknowledged the disruption to interpersonal relationships, they suggested that friendship could be replaced with proxies: social integration, nationalism, civic friendship. But no evidence was offered to suggest that a sense of being part of a collective is a substitute for a real interpersonal relationship; indeed, as Chapter 2 will argue, no amount of abstract *feeling* can substitute for friendship, which is an interactive *process*. There was an implicit assumption that healthy interpersonal relationships would evolve naturally through “appropriate” channels, such as occupational associations and workplace relationships. In the structural-functionalist framework that first dominated comparative politics, everything had an order

and a precise function. So there was an implicit scepticism towards social interactions that were formed independently of governments, uncontrollable, and whose functions eluded generalization.

Consider this passage by Edward Shils:

A society is integrated if its various parts are indirectly and directly in interaction with each other beyond the ties of lineage, intermarriage and procreation through a planned or unplanned division of labour and through the network of exchange of goods and services ... it is integrated on the ground that they possess “qualities” conferred simply by regularly living on the bounded territory which defines the outer limits of the society. They are “affectively,” even if not conflictlessly, attached to each other on the basis of their common possession of those qualities – whether they are in direct interaction with each other or act towards each other only indirectly and at a distance.<sup>66</sup>

Shils clearly asserted here that interpersonal relationships between unrelated people are important; in a healthy society, there should be regular contact between proximate people who have some shared beliefs, interdependencies and understandings of how to gain their livelihoods in a relatively harmonious way with others in society. But “integration” here comprised so many things that it was impossible to operationalize the interpersonal realm becomes lost amidst so many other things – such as legitimacy and state capacity. The author also omitted the possibility, in the first and second sentences, that some people might be left out of existing networks and exchange relationships – he seemed to be assuming that everyone was equally affected. He attributed a lack of integration to all kinds of negative phenomena – wars, secessions, civil wars – but how one would determine whether integration is present or absent was unclear. Like other comparativists of his era, he emphasized the absence of unstable outcomes – corruption, violence – over the achievement of social improvement or the building of society.<sup>67</sup>

Earlier in the work, in the preface, Shils hinted that his goal was not to look at how rewarding or positive interpersonal relationships are but to examine the mystery of people who share a common society when they don’t know each other well:

I wished to show the limits of both love and ideology in providing the intensity of attachment and the cognitive content of a loose consensus of a vast number of individuals who had no contact with each other and who were not voluntarily recruited.<sup>68</sup>

It was almost as if there is a value in interpersonal distance, then, for Shils. Integration involves “civility” – demonstrating respect for others and the work they do<sup>69</sup> – but not naming warmth and intimacy to be essential.

In these early comparative texts, there was an assumption that the dominant relationship in people's lives would be the heterosexual marriage. As Charles Taylor argued, the transition from more traditional society to modernity involved an elevation of the companionship role of marriage, which was more private than the more communal society of earlier eras.<sup>70</sup> For Parsons, as discussed earlier, friendship outside of workplace socializing or marriage was somewhat superfluous. Thus, there was a predisposition to consider the middle-class heterosexual couple to be the norm, and little mention of people who might not belong to these categories. Writing soon after the end of the Second World War, Parsons seemed to call for a retreat to the domesticity of the home as an anchor of social stability. This cozy, tidy dwelling would provide a place of refreshment for the busy man of the house, who was striving for success in the workplace.

In our discussion thus far, scholars tended to talk around the problem of friendship. They identified a vague absence (or insufficiency) of interpersonal relationships as being a problem; however, instead of prescribing a remedy in the interpersonal sphere (friendship and friendship-based policies), they advocated proxies, substitutes for it. Such approaches are problematic. The first problem is an empirical one. There was little evidence to demonstrate that a proxy compensated for, or is even definitely related, to the missing relationships. The second problem was the lack of attention to people who were left out of friendship. Not everyone can become a professional association or work outside the home; marriage is not available to everyone (and until recently, was explicitly not available to gay, lesbian and transgender couples); and immigrants who have not yet been naturalized don't enjoy whatever feelings of belonging are associated with citizenship. If friendship is to be valued as a universal benefit in the same way that we regard universal human rights or health care, then the friendless person needs to be the centre of the conversation. Finally, it is potentially stigmatizing to imply that friendless, socially isolated people are potential political troublemakers, when no studies have determined that socially isolated people are any more inclined to anti-democratic politics than members of the general public, even if (as Almond suggested), socially isolated people could be found among the members of authoritarian movements.

An exception to this trend in comparative politics was Reinhard Bendix, who acknowledged the loss of relationships and posited a role for the state to play in addressing that, even indirectly. Bendix's concept of "nation-building" relied on the idea that there is a need for an individual to have a social connection to others, especially when so many had been displaced. Bendix recognized that people who have been disconnected from their previous societies and communities have lost something that they have not regained:

We may well face a period in history in which fragments of nation-building – like the quest for a national culture, the unification of language, the detribalization of a population, the assimilation of ethnic communities, the formalization of laws, the elimination of corruption, the maintenance of order, the demilitarization of quasi-autonomous groups, and a thousand other issues – are tackled piecemeal and without immediate prospect of a definitive outcome. In that perspective, the dominant experience of our generation appears to be that the unanticipated repercussions of European expansion were effective enough to undermine or destroy existing social frameworks, but often not nearly enough to provide viable structural alternatives.<sup>71</sup>

The concept of nation-building inherently assumes that there is a role for the state to play in creating a sense of shared community and that it is desirable for the state to do so.<sup>72</sup>

### **Making Space for Friendship in Comparative Politics**

By the 1990s, several strands of scholarship emerged that created a space for interpersonal relationships as a subject of interest. Amitai Etzioni transcended the structural-functionalist approach of the political development school to call for renewed attention to the political significance of horizontal interactions between people. In the passage previously cited in the “Introduction,” Etzioni implies that context is important in determining one’s ability to access “affection and recognition.”<sup>73</sup> He argued that while some people need less human companionship than others, no person can do without it altogether and still have a thriving life. Their health and their sense of security and agency will suffer.<sup>74</sup> Raising a parallel with the environmental movement, Etzioni called for individuals to exercise “stewardship” over the “moral ecology”: “one has a responsibility to nurture the identity of the community itself through participation in its practices, concern for its past, present and future members, and protection of its resources.”<sup>75</sup> He explored the question of how ethically to balance the duties and loyalties one has towards friends and family, which might mean they are favoured over members of the community as a whole. So in his earlier work, Etzioni suggested that interpersonal relationships were essential and that the ability to have friendships was influenced by the social context in which a person found themselves. A logical consequence of this position is to ask the question: could the political system encourage friendship by changing the context that enables an individual to access friendship? But in his 2002 article, Etzioni departed from this question: focussing on the ethics of the people who already had friends rather than pondering the condition of friendship deprivation.

Another political scientist, Robert Putnam, wrote extensively of the importance of civil society activity in building democracy. People engaging and interacting with each other freely is at the very core of democracy.<sup>76</sup> In the 1990s, Putnam documented a trend towards a reduction of “social capital,” insofar as for several decades in the United States, surveys showed declining participation of adults in social organizations, churches, neighbourhood activities, and sports. Data suggested that people had fewer friends than in decades past. Putnam posited that this trend might be linked to societal developments: as more women entered the workforce, people had less time to spend on non-familial social engagements, while many people faced longer commutes, stayed home more often to watch television, or had to work longer hours.<sup>77</sup> Putnam posited that these trends had structural trends that could be partially addressed through government policies: for example, by pursuing urban developments that kept local social networks intact, rather than cleaving existing neighbourhoods.<sup>78</sup> Putnam thus acknowledged that interpersonal relationships matter and that they can be impacted by government policies. In the 2020 monograph *The Upswing*, Putnam engaged with more recent comparative data to show how Americans in recent decades continue to be less socially active than previously and are less involved in their neighbourhoods and communities. He inquired as to whether these trends might be related to other problems in political life, such as ideological polarization. Somewhat surprisingly, though, when it came to solutions, Putnam gave more attention to building broad-based social movements than to proposing particular government actions.<sup>79</sup>

A third relevant development in scholarship questioned the primacy of heterosexual, cisgender marriage in the understanding of interpersonal relationships, pointing out that marriage had historically been based on men’s dominance over women.<sup>80</sup> Patriarchal political hierarchies also enabled relationships between lesbian, gay, and non-binary individuals to be stigmatized and marginalized. In particular, Michel Foucault observed that the privileged position of heterosexual marriage in society was reinforced by its cultural depiction as a relationship that was both modern and “natural.”<sup>81</sup> The AIDS crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s increased social awareness of the depth and strength of interpersonal relationships between gay men, and the extent to which civil society organizations to respond to the AIDS epidemic had built on pre-existing friendship networks.<sup>82</sup> With the legalization of same-sex marriage in many countries in the twenty-first century, scholars such as Philip M. Ayoub and Omar G. Encarnación pioneered cross-national studies in marriage equality, helping to claim the study of interpersonal relationships as a subject of inquiry for comparative politics.<sup>83</sup> More recently, in disrupting direct person-to-person contact for countless people around the globe, the COVID-19

pandemic has made the importance of interpersonal connection between people very obvious, while highlighting the ways in which developments within the political sphere can contribute to social isolation.<sup>84</sup>

This chapter has outlined the ways in which interpersonal relationships, and specifically friendship, have been addressed in key texts in comparative politics. Interpersonal relationships have finally been established as a subject within the purview of the sub-discipline. Some scholars have hinted at the political determinants of friendship and raised questions about the adverse political consequences that arise when friendships weaken within society. We can therefore continue to explore this conversation in more depth by reviewing available evidence on the implications of these questions. Chapter 2 will address the benefits of friendship, to individuals and to society as a whole. Chapter 3 will explore the key question of who is left out of friendship, examining the political nature of these exclusions. Having addressed those questions, we can then proceed to the main theme of this manuscript: could specific actions of government help to raise the quality and quantity of friendships? Can friendships be accessible to all who want and need them? These will be difficult questions to answer definitively, but by claiming the subject for comparative politics, we can begin to move the conversation forward.

## Notes

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## 2 The Benefits of Friendship for Political Society

“The grass needs cutting,” said Rune at last.  
“I bought new blades for the mower.” Ove nodded.  
“How much did you pay for them?”  
And so their friendship went on.

Fredrik Backman, *A Man Called Ove*, London, UK:  
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The epigraph provides an anecdote about the proximity, banality and everyday contact that is the essence of friendship, and illustrates that it need not involve deep, reflective conversation. In the novel *A Man Called Ove*, the main character is a childless, recently retired older man who has lost his wife to cancer. Unable to move beyond his grief, Ove resolves to end his life, but his suicide attempts are interrupted by neighbours who continually ask for his help with problems. Although Ove is a gruff loner, he can fix anything and has useful things, such as ladders, that people need to borrow. Over time, his neighbours irritate him less and welcome him into their homes. They draw out his empathetic side, and he finds himself surrounded by caring companionship. Friendship has quite literally saved Ove’s life. To paraphrase the Canadian rock group *The Tragically Hip*, Ove has found a good life by finding the place where he is needed.<sup>1</sup> It matters to Ove that he can live a useful life, where the feeling of uselessness he felt after his wife’s death has dissipated as he learns how much his neighbours value him.<sup>2</sup>

An important caveat to discussing the benefits of friendship is that there are many aspects of the subject that existing studies have not yet been able to capture. Scientists agree that social interaction is beneficial, but no consensus yet exists on exactly what aspects of such interaction are most critical. They often do not separate friendships from other kinds of social experiences such as regular churchgoing.<sup>3</sup> Researchers also typically

ask participants to define friendship as they see fit rather than giving participants a consistent definition.<sup>4</sup> When one identifies a correlation between friendship and other variables, it can be difficult to determine causation. For instance, early studies on the relationship between social isolation and poor health did not always prove that social isolation caused poor health rather than poor health leading to social isolation.<sup>5</sup> If people are chronically ill, they may find it difficult to summon the capacity and energy to keep up with friends, and may face challenge meeting friends outside the home.

A second challenge in understanding the significance of friendship in modern life is that very little research has been done to assess how friendship evolves over the course of a person's lifespan. As a result, it is hard to determine what factors are relevant to a person's age and which factors are inherent to a person's generational cohort.<sup>6</sup> This is significant insofar as people who grew up at different times might have differing understandings of the role that friendship should play in their lives because of cultural shifts. For example, as Rebecca G. Adams and Rosemary Blieszner argued, people born during the postwar "baby boom" (1945–1963) showed that they felt that they spent more time with friends and valued friendship more highly than people of their parents' generation.<sup>7</sup> As the baby boomers age beyond retirement, it will be important to take into account that for people who are over 60 as of 2024, friendship may be particularly precious to them. But we lack the cross-generational research to determine whether friendship is less important (or more important) to Generation X and beyond.

A third caveat: the reader might observe that it is not friendship *per se* that is important to people; it is social relationships. Warm and supportive family relationships are just as valuable as friendship relationships. Why then focus our attention on policies to encourage friendship rather than relationships in general? It's an important question with an easy answer. The answer is that in varying ways across states, families are already supported by government policies and law in ways that friendships are not. The very institution of marriage is a state institution that provides tangible legal benefits to the spousal pair (such as inheritance, property, or guardianship rights). This was precisely the reason why LGBTQ rights activists worked so hard to make the benefits of marriage available to couples who diverged from the model of the cisgender heterosexual couple.<sup>8</sup> Social policies provide benefits to families in particular circumstances, such as widowhood, parenthood, or housing support. By contrast, one is hard pressed to think of examples of social policies targeted towards friendship, even though friends may provide caregiving, share households, care for each other's children, or hold power of attorney.

Finally, friendship as a variable is often posited as being the opposite of loneliness, so that it is assumed that remedies for loneliness will

automatically gain the lonely person more friends – or that friendship with people is not necessary if people’s loneliness is addressed. For example, a 2022 book on loneliness by Michelle Drouin acknowledged the importance of befriending people who are lonely, but she also argued that lonely people’s needs for contact could be met in part by paid massages, robots, and pets.<sup>9</sup> While this may be true, it overlooks the question of whether friendship might have other benefits besides “curing” loneliness in an individual – in particular, benefits to society.

This chapter will discuss the benefits of friendship as follows. First, it will be posited that an essential purpose of government, as argued by Aristotle and John Dewey among others, that government should strive to create the conditions for happiness. Therefore, it is within the realm of government’s mandate to try to improve people’s lives. Second, there will be a discussion of the benefits of friendship, as established in empirical research. The evidence from such research is multidisciplinary but rather fragmented. While existing studies create a strong case that friendship is good for people, more research will be needed in order to form a conclusive body of evidence. Finally, the chapter asserts that encouraging friendship can be a matter for government action, insofar as such policies could be considered to be within the realm of social welfare. Friendship-stimulation is also consistent with the fact that governments already are involved in people’s relationships, through marriage laws, tax and social policies that are oriented towards biological families.

### **The Empirical Case for Friendship**

Figure 2.1 provides an overview of the benefits of friendship, as established in the literature from social science, health research, and the business level. The diagram says that the benefits of friendship can be established at four levels: The individual, social groups, the working world, and the polity.

To begin, friendship benefits the individual. In his influential report written while he was US surgeon general, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy discussed both the “epidemic” of loneliness and the negative impact that it had, framing it as a serious threat to the physical and mental health of individuals.<sup>10</sup> The surgeon general distinguished between loneliness, which was an individual’s self-defined feeling of having not enough positive interpersonal relationships, which social isolation referred to as an empirical situation of a person having infrequent social contacts and a paucity of supportive relationships. Both were associated with numerous adverse health impacts, with the impacts of social isolation slightly higher.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than addressing friendship specifically, the surgeon general’s report considered the important role that “social connection” plays in cushioning these adverse impacts. The term “social connection” recognizes that

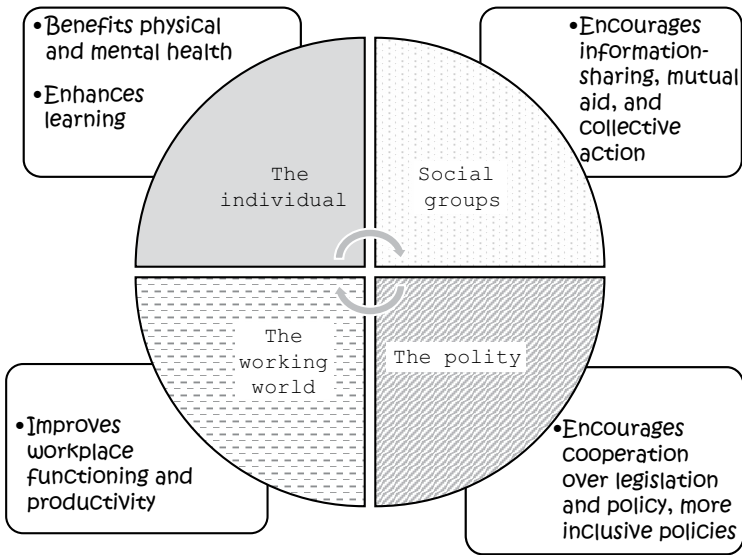


Figure 2.1 Benefits of Friendship: What the Evidence Reveals.

what is important is not the type of relationship (blood relative, leisure time friend, workplace colleague), but having regular social interaction and meaningful relationships.<sup>12</sup> In that sense, the surgeon general's report rather missed the opportunity to discuss the unique nature of friendship and the ways in which friendship is at risk. Indeed, the report observed that Americans have fewer close friends today than they did 40–50 years ago, and they spend less time than previously. Furthermore, young people (under 24) are among the most isolated.<sup>13</sup>

These findings suggest that there is not only a loneliness crisis but also a crisis of friendship deprivation. As stated earlier, friendship deserves discussion as a separate category, insofar as friendship may be especially important to those who live far from their families, are estranged from them, or have outlived all their relatives. Friendship is particularly important to people who are separated and divorced, where people are less likely to have family to turn to in cases when they need help. In instances of disability or pregnancy, ten percent of participants in a British Social Survey said that when they needed help, they went to friends or neighbours first, rather than family.<sup>14</sup> The AIDS crisis showed the importance that groups of friends played in the caregiving for people disabled by the virus, even helping them pay the bills.<sup>15</sup>

(It can be noted that the trend to declining friendship is not universal. For example, researchers who surveyed Hungarians found that since the

collapse of communism, people have closer relationships with their friends and less close relations with their families.<sup>16</sup>)

Long before the surgeon general's report, scientific studies showed the adverse health impacts of loneliness and the benefits of friendship. Much of the research comes from the health sciences. A review of literature, completed in 1988, showed that people who had good social relationships were less likely to have severe chronic diseases, and had lower mortality, than those without.<sup>17</sup> A study done at Duke University Medical Centre found that people with less than four friends were more likely to die of heart disease than people with more than four friends.<sup>18</sup> Experts on friendship Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl observe that just as there is well-established evidence that social isolation is associated with depression, studies have shown that people who have regular contact with friends, family and neighbours have better mental health than those who don't.<sup>19</sup>

Another experimental study tested the heart responses of participants who were undertaking stressful situations. The researchers found that those who brought a close friend to the situation showed lower stress-related heart activity than those who brought a less close friend.<sup>20</sup> A similar study measuring stress responses in women found that those who brought either a friend or a pet to the experiment showed less stress than those who came alone.<sup>21</sup> Older people who experience loneliness, defined as a person living alone and having few social encounters, were more likely than the non-lonely to have weaker immune systems, lower cognitive abilities, memory and sleep problems, and lower physical activity levels.<sup>22</sup> Animal studies have shown that those who are isolated experience, over time, a reduced capacity of the parts of the brain needed for social interaction and also that animals placed in an environment with other animals recovered more fully from stroke than those who were kept isolated.<sup>23</sup> A study of people living with traumatic brain injury (TBI) found that many had lost friends since their injury, and there was a strong association between friendlessness and depression.<sup>24</sup> A study of aphasia victims found similar results.<sup>25</sup>

Research on children and teenagers has shown that those with friends are less likely to be bullied, had a greater sense of self-worth, and had a more well-defined sense of ethics than those who didn't. For kids who have experienced domestic violence or neglect, friendship provided a comforting place of safety.<sup>26</sup> Members of visible minority groups in one study felt that their friendships offered them some protection from discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

Friendship can aid resilience. A study of university students during the lockdown periods of the pandemic showed that those who maintained good friendships during that time showed reduced levels of stress and a more positive outlook compared to students who didn't.<sup>28</sup> Regarding friendship pursued online: Researchers found that students in Singapore

found they valued their close friendships (people they saw in person) for enhancing their sense of self-worth and enrichment of their daily lives. By contrast, the less close friendships, often pursued mainly through social media, were valued for providing information about career advancement, job-seeking and networking.<sup>29</sup> Additional research showed that friendships made online often became in-person friendships, while social media helped people to maintain the friendships they already had.<sup>30</sup> Neurobiologists have found that when people are with friends, they experience release of hormones oxytocin, dopamine and serotonin, which produce states of relaxation and pleasure.<sup>31</sup>

In friendship, quality is more important than quantity: one study showed that having four friends was just as beneficial as having more than four friends.<sup>32</sup> Not to be underestimated is that friendship can provide enjoyment and respite. A study of women in New Zealand found that participants saw their friendships as a sort of place of solace away from the hectic pressures of daily life:

Our analysis outlines three discursive patterns – friendships as lazy escapes, friendship as a site of resistance to being nice, and the delights of comfortable familiarity.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the research of Stephanie Brown et al suggests that being a friend to others is good for one's health: those who help others tend to live longer and healthier lives.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Social Groups***

Friendship can offer mutual aid and support during the personal emergency of one of the friends. In a study of Filipina migrant care workers in New York City, those women formed friendship networks that provided not only companionship but mutual aid and support.<sup>35</sup> Friendship could facilitate political participation. A study showed that Māori in New Zealand who had many friendships with other Māori were more likely to be politically active in movements to demand equality rights, compared to those with fewer friendships.<sup>36</sup>

Friendship could ease tensions over political divides in society. In 1953, a study was done on an experiment in a college course where students were compelled to work on group projects with students who had dramatically different political views from them. The researchers found that over time, tensions decreased, cooperative behaviour increased, friendships developed, and the participants even found a consensus over political fundamentals upon which they agreed.<sup>37</sup> The results are intriguing, suggesting that polarization can decrease when people are compelled to work with and rely upon others. However, such an experiment would be

difficult to replicate today, insofar as it would be ethically problematic for higher education institutions to compel students to self-identify by their political ideology.

### *The Working World*

A survey of 174 factory workers showed that when employers enabled friendships to develop at work, employees were more content with their jobs, less likely to seek employment elsewhere, and were more attentive to the work.<sup>38</sup> People who counted at least one close friend at their workplace showed higher productivity and fewer sick days than those without.<sup>39</sup> A study of American volunteer fire departments showed that friendships within the organization contributed to the continuity and longevity of the organizations, and the trust they enjoyed in their localities.<sup>40</sup>

### *The Polity*

One challenge is that friendship within political science has been sometimes seen in a negative light: as “informal politics” – the sort of political logrolling and behind-the-scenes conversation between which is sometimes dismissed as clientelism or even corruption. Informal politics can be bad if it means politicians are accepting personal favours or prioritizing interest groups over voters.<sup>41</sup> Some scholars argue that “informal politics” gets a raw deal – it need not be associated with secret deals or preferential treatment, but rather can involve patterns of person-to-person negotiation and the building of relationships.<sup>42</sup> For example, if politicians have friendly informal relationships with each other, they might be able to prevent crises from escalating or to fend off threats to democracy.<sup>43</sup> However, it is difficult for the political scientist to assess events that didn’t happen.

Recent empirical research on the beneficial consequences of friendship on the political arena suggests some promising results. Friendship can be a pathway to building empathy and insight, even inclusion of disadvantaged groups. In a study of elected members of local assemblies in Sweden, the researchers found that those who counted members of disadvantaged groups among their friends were more likely to support policies that benefitted members of those groups. The authors didn’t find this too surprising, but the finding provides a piece of evidence that supports the role of friendship in encouraging empathy for others.<sup>44</sup> Another study found that when a relatively well-off person has friends who are economically disadvantaged, they are more likely to support redistributive politics and to acknowledge the disproportionate power that comes with wealth.<sup>45</sup>

Friendship can help to bridge political divides. Christian Fong’s research on members of the US Congress found that friendships, including friendships that transcended party lines, were common among them

and that they considered them to be crucial in guiding their understanding of legislation. Newer members especially valued the mentorship of longer-serving members. (Fong's research focussed on 1979–2015, and he observed that friendships in the current moment, 2020, were declining).<sup>46</sup> Similarly, study of municipal councils in the United States found that they regarded trust and cooperation with their colleagues on council as essential to getting their work done.<sup>47</sup> In a work on the French Revolution, Sarah Horowitz argued that friendships between leaders across various divides can help calm a situation of social upheaval and reach agreement on fundamentals of government.<sup>48</sup> More recently, it has been shown that when straight people become friends with LGBTQ identity, their attitudes towards homosexuality become more positive than before.<sup>49</sup>

Friendship can impact individuals' political choices. Arnand Edward Sokhey and Scott D. McClurg found using datasets from 1992 to 2000 datasets that people frequently discussed election campaigns with their friends, and that these conversations had an impact on whether and how they voted.<sup>50</sup> Finally, as Danny Kaplan argued, friendship between individuals who are citizens of the same state can reinforce feelings of shared nationhood and thereby strengthen the nation-state.<sup>51</sup>

### **Can Friendship Be Beneficial at the Global Level?**

The concept of friendship has been an important norm in the field of international relations. The idea that states should have “friendly relations” with each other is in the United Nations Charter of 1945: in fact, it is mentioned in Article 1 on the purposes of the United Nations. Like interpersonal friendship, the concept of friendship in international relations is based on a notion of recognizing each other as equals and respecting each other's autonomy.<sup>52</sup> The notion of friendship as desirable in international relations reflects the desire to prevent war but also relies upon an assumption that practices of regular communication and cooperation can build a mutually beneficial relationship, reducing the hostility that leads to war.<sup>53</sup> The notion that friendly relations builds peaceful outcomes is the basis of the “democratic peace” literature, which argues that liberal democracies rarely go to war with each other due to their habituation to democratic deliberation and their shared norms and values. While proponents of democratic peace have developed a substantive evidence base, critics of the literature argue that the literature fails to take into account other factors that might account for the peace between liberal democratic nations. Nevertheless, the aggressive behaviours of anti-democratic leaders such as Vladimir Putin compel us to revisit the connection between regime type and cooperative behaviour.<sup>54</sup>

Friendship between nations as a concept is relevant to a discussion of friendship in politics insofar as it provides a model of conduct that may reinforce friendly conduct in individuals. For example, friendships between

leaders of rival states may provide a pathway to establishing more cooperative relations and reducing international tensions: historians have observed that the friendships that Soviet Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev established with leaders of Western countries in the 1980s were one of the factors that contributed to the end of the Cold War.<sup>55</sup> However, friendship between nations is a metaphor; states, being inanimate entities, cannot actually be friends with each other. Therefore, international relations is beyond the scope of the present study, which deals with direct interpersonal contact as a variable linked with the political sphere.

### **Normative Benefits of Friendship on Politics: Arguments Made**

As discussed in the previous chapter, social scientists who were pioneers in comparative politics acknowledged that modernization had unravelled existing relationships, but they sometimes thought that such relationships could be replaced by more “modern” forms of social interaction. But other theorists called more explicitly for a focus on friendship, fearing that a deterioration of friendship could have adverse impacts on society. A term that is relevant to a discussion of friendship and politics is *solidarity*. It is not a synonym for friendship, but it connotes fellowship with a shared purpose in working together for a common goal. It has a political connotation, insofar as it is often used in trade unions or in social movements demanding political change.<sup>56</sup> At this point, it is time to return to the concept of *anomie* developed by Emile Durkheim, who wrote of the profound disruption of social relationships that industrialization had imposed upon society. This disruption was leading to the pain of social isolation in individuals cut off from their previous ties. Durkheim thought that this trauma would continue unless and until a sense of “organic solidarity” was established: a new form of social connection between people, based on shared work but also on shared beliefs in reciprocity and fairness:

Our faith has been disturbed: tradition has lost its influence; individual judgement has become emancipated from collective judgement ... functions disrupted during the upheaval have not had time to adjust to one another. The new life that emerged so suddenly has not been able to get completely organized, and, most importantly, has not been organized in a way that satisfies the need for justice which has grown stronger in our hearts. If this is the case, the remedy for the evil is not, however, to try to revive traditions and practices which, no longer responding to actual social conditions, can only be revived artificially and in appearance only. We must put a stop to their *anomie*. We must find ways of making these organs function harmoniously, which, at

present, clash discordantly. We must introduce greater justice into their relationships by further diminishing the external inequalities which are the source of our ills.<sup>57</sup>

Was Durkheim talking about friendship? I believe he was. He clearly was not advocating a return to a pastoral vision of village life centred on traditional families, nor on a common submission to authority, whether secular or religious. Nor was he calling for an abstract sense of shared nationhood; his use of the word “relationships” suggests human beings together, talking. What was at stake if this solidarity was not built? The consequences could include injustice, possibly civil conflict, but most of all human misery of the sort that in some cases may end in suicide.<sup>58</sup> If the task of government is to make people less miserable and more content, then encouraging friendship is a natural task for government. But to build a society based on equality and justice meant a deeper transformation. A hundred years before Durkheim, Mary Wollstonecraft believed that friendship could be a conduit to achieving greater equality in society, particularly if a husband and wife developed a less patriarchal, more friendship-based relationship, it could spill over into society as a whole. She also felt that if there was more friendship, people would be more interested in finding solutions to poverty and other social problems.<sup>59</sup>

A more recent reflection on friendship was provided by the philosopher Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, friendship at its best provides the human being with optimism for the future – someone to look forward to seeing, someone to share excitement, to remember you when you are gone:

If one names and cites the best friends, those who have illustrated “true and perfect friendship,” it is because this friendship comes to illuminate. It illustrates itself, makes happy or successful things shine, gives them visibility, renders them more resplendent. . . . It gives rise to a project, the anticipation, the perspective, the providence of a hope that illuminates in advance the future (*praelucet*), thereby transporting the name’s renown beyond death.<sup>60</sup>

Derrida argued that friendship could create a more tolerant and inclusive global society if it replaced the conception of the nation as a “brotherhood.” The use of family-based metaphors for citizenship, he argued, encouraged a gatekeeping mentality that reserved the benefits of citizenship for insiders and enhanced existing fears against migrants and refugees.

Derrida concluded his monograph by calling upon the reader to envisage a friendship-based democracy:

When will we be ready for an experience of freedom and equality that is capable of respectfully experiencing that friendship which would at last be just, just beyond the law, and measured up against its measurelessness?<sup>61</sup>

Democracy, then, would be based on equality, but an equality that does not divide people between “my compatriots” and “foreigners.”

The authors described so far in this section saw friendship as a long-term task towards building a fairer society. This process involved re-thinking social interaction, levelling asymmetries in power relations, and cultivating friendly attitudes towards others. For philosopher Hannah Arendt, the task was more urgent: she saw friendship as a “practice” and a “duty” – in an age where cruelty and indifference had been visible to all, the individual was obliged to nurture personal relationships that acknowledged the humanity of each person.<sup>62</sup> Friendship offers a preventative against the repression and cruelty of the sort practiced by Nazi Germany, as a compassion for those who are at risk of persecution may enable people to act to keep the bullies out of government. If the authoritarians should come to power, friendship helps to insulate people from harms during “dark times,” when people may particularly need the comfort and support of intimates.<sup>63</sup>

There are simple, logical arguments for friendship: unlike material goods, friendship is free. It is accessible to all. People can keep making friends throughout their lives without giving up the friends they have. It really is an unlimited resource that provides benefits without a cost.<sup>64</sup> Chapter 3 will discuss some of the barriers to friendship that some people face, which are barriers that can be overcome.

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### 3 Hierarchies of Friendship and Exclusion

Fraulein Rüdiger was here on June 7 after a long gap (*one* year). We had already fallen out a little on that occasion because her only response to my bitterness was that I was overwrought and should take a rest.... And today she had written me a pathetic letter: Tragedy, pain over the friendship, everything must take second place to the Fatherland and nation, the miraculous deed of the Führer, in which she believes.

Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness, volume 1: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933–1941*. Trans. Martin Chalmers. New York: Modern Library, 1999, p. 69.

With these words, Victor Klemperer described the sense of betrayal when a former friend, lost to fervour for the Nazis, abandoned him. Klemperer was a German-Jewish professor who, remarkably, survived the entirety of Nazi rule in Germany. Married to a non-Jewish wife, he lost his professorship soon after the Nazis came to power but was spared from the concentration camps. He nevertheless endured deprivations and humiliations and ultimately fled his home, returning after the Nazis were defeated at the end of the Second World War. He documented the struggles of his daily life in his remarkable diaries, entitled *I Will Bear Witness*, published after the war and eventually translated into English. Early in his memoir, Klemperer documented the pain of losing friendships when many of his former colleagues abandoned him. He had written a letter of recommendation for the son of a family friend, which enabled the young man to join the German officer corps, only to learn that the son had joined the Nazi party.<sup>1</sup> Klemperer's friendship losses increased as some of the couple's Jewish friends emigrated abroad, in haste, without saying goodbye.<sup>2</sup> By 1936, Klemperer wrote with pain about "our terrible abandonment by all friends."<sup>3</sup> Not long after the defeat of the Nazis, Klemperer was enraged

when a former friend, a pro-Nazi history professor, tried to resume a cordial relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Klemperer's experience illustrates two important themes of this chapter: first, the dark side of friendships that exclude others, which this case arguably left Jews such as Klemperer more vulnerable to Nazi persecution than they might have been had friends stood up for them. Secondly, the reader of *I Will Bear Witness* can plainly see how much pain this ostracism caused Klemperer, which left emotional scars for many years.

Chapter 2 discussed the case for the benefits of friendship, which are considerable. But if we are to offer a full account of the impacts of friendship, we should consider also its possible harms. While true friendships have few harms, loners have often been regarded with mistrust as people who are antisocial, vulnerable to extremism, or eccentric. Friendless people are often made quite aware of those perceptions and feel pain because of them. Worse, as Klemperer's experience illustrates, people may be denied access to friendship because of their ethnic identities or the political labels unfairly attached to them. Some of the friends that Klemperer lost were neither Nazis nor Nazi sympathizers but simply people who found it awkward to be friends with a Jew when an antisemitic regime was in power. Upon attending a conference in his field in 1936, Klemperer wrote, "Not one of my Romance Language colleagues called on me; I am like a plague corpse."<sup>5</sup>

### **Friendship Asymmetries: Political Causes and Consequences**

Figure 3.1 illustrates four dimensions of the phenomenon of friendlessness, or of friendship-deprivation: Hierarchies of friendship, clientelism, exclusion, and stereotypes. It is important here to distinguish friendlessness from aloneness, or loneliness. Lonely people often lack friends, or wish they had deeper relationships. However, people with friends can be lonely, and people without friends are not necessarily lonely. Part of the problem with friendlessness and loneliness is that they carry a stigma, enabling those who are alone to be judged for a perceived lack of social skills or positive character traits.<sup>6</sup> Loneliness is a part of life that does not necessarily need to be "fixed" if the person encounters it temporarily or chooses to be alone.<sup>7</sup> It is also possible that a person feels friendless, having a high standard for who they consider a friend, without realizing how many people actually are in their corner. In David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*, a group of very different people recovering from substance abuse issues find friendship with each other while experiencing an absurd chain of events:

And when Ferocious Francis G. and the White Flaggers presented him, on the September Sunday that marked his first year sober, with a faultlessly baked and heavily frosted one-candle cake, Don Gately had cried in front of nonrelatives for the first time in his life. He now denies that he actually did cry, saying something about candle-fumes in his eye. But he did.<sup>8</sup>

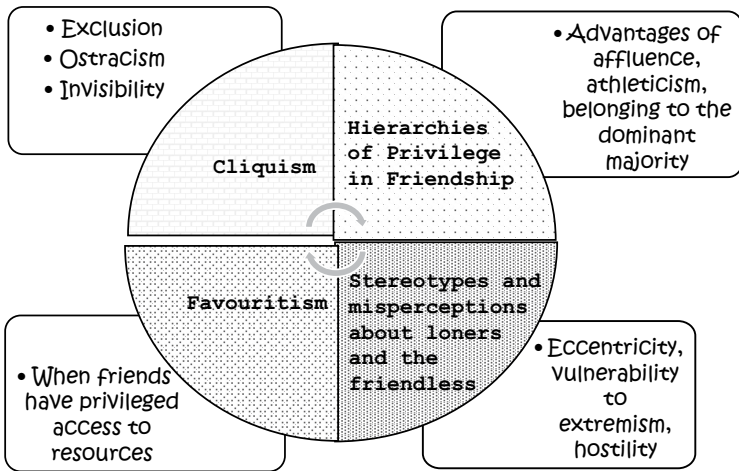


Figure 3.1 Harms Associated with Friendship and Its Absence.

### Hierarchies of Friendship

While friendship is theoretically open to any person befriended by another, in practice access to friendship is unequally distributed. Political theorists have long observed that people who live on the margins of society, or who are economically disadvantaged are likely to be lonely.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, when the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle discussed friendship, he fixed his gaze on the friendships of the privileged: the free-born men who enjoyed the benefits of education and who had ample leisure time to spend with their well-off companions. Other than the friendly goodwill of his master, a slave had no need for friendship. And for women, who were dedicated to their children and remained at home under their husbands' rule, friendship was irrelevant.<sup>10</sup>

People who are affluent may have more opportunities for friendship, and people tend to choose friends whom they perceive to enhance their status, taking into consideration their appearance and fashion choices.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, people who have socioeconomic disadvantages are also disadvantaged when it comes to friendship. Poor people, Black people, and the elderly are among the most socially isolated in the United States, in a society where wealth, political clout, and career success are keys to social status.<sup>12</sup> Men in particular often lose friends when they become unemployed.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, friendship was historically described in gendered terms. As Willow Verkerk wrote, the question of who is able to be a friend gets at the heart of who philosophy considers to be human. If freedom and reflection are seen as essential for friendship, this will exclude a lot of people; historically, friendship was considered to be a male preserve. Women were either too motherhood-centred or too defined as heterosexual love objects to be real friends, for example, she quotes Nietzsche as saying, “[W]oman is not yet capable of friendship: she knows only love.”<sup>14</sup>

Even the feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir had difficulty imagining the friendship of women as reaching the standard of that of men:

The feminine friendships that she succeeds in keeping or forming are precious to a woman, but they are very different in kind from relations between men. The latter communicate as individuals through ideas and projects of personal interest, while women are confined within their general feminine lot and are bound together by a kind of immanent complicity.... Through their propensity for chatter and self-display genuine anxiety sometimes emerges.<sup>15</sup>

What was de Beauvoir trying to say here? One interpretation is that a relative lack of political power combined with a socialization to be fixated on attracting men, conditions women’s friendship to be limited. So not necessarily an inherent weakness of women. But nevertheless this quotation implies that women cannot be friends until they are emancipated, leaving out the possibility that women’s friendships might themselves be emancipatory. She also seems to assume that men’s friendships are elevated because of the privileges they enjoy in society, which leaves out the possibility that undeserved privileges might actually rot their brains and take away from their capacity for friendship.

Furthermore, the idea that women don’t have the “ideas and projects” that are a basis for friendship betrays a lack of curiosity, or perhaps condescension, about the kinds of creativity that women have expressed. In a particularly disparaging remark, de Beauvoir wrote that women’s conversations with each other don’t transcend far beyond “exchanging recipes.”<sup>16</sup> What is wrong with exchanging recipes? Why would cooking not be considered a legitimate form of artistry in its own right or a basis for a meaningful conversation about a shared interest? As Madeleine Pelling wrote, English women in the eighteenth century often bonded while doing

traditionally feminine forms of handicrafts together, such as needlework. The conversations were sincere and meaningful to the participants.<sup>17</sup> To look down on recipes or lacemaking, then, is to look down on the women who are doing them.

Another hierarchy of friendship that has historically existed is the exclusion of people with mental illness or disability. Theories linking intelligence with social capacity held that some people were biologically incapable of having functional healthy relationships. In the twentieth century, there was a theory that the “feeble-minded” and “morons,” people who were (often erroneously) deemed to have low intelligence, constituted a social problem, as such people were prone to promiscuity or criminal behaviour. In a work influential in its time, Henry Goddard published a highly questionable research study, profiling a family (the Kallikaks) who he considered to be genetically “feeble-minded.” He focussed on a young daughter, being raised in an institution, who he considered to be incapable of functioning in society, despite the fact that she was described as a talented woodworker, musician and dressmaker, and a pleasant and helpful person:

Today if this young woman were to leave the Institution, she would at once become a prey to the designs of evil men or evil women and would lead a life that would be vicious, immoral and criminal, though because of her mentality she would not herself be responsible.<sup>18</sup>

To the twenty-first-century reader, this account is almost incomprehensible; the main “evidence” given that she was “feeble-minded” was that she had trouble with mathematics and daydreamed during lessons, but more to the point, she was the child of a single mother who was unable to look after her. In effect, there was a moral panic about a perceived relationship between intergenerational poverty, low intelligence, and lifestyles of crime and/or promiscuity:

There are Kallikak families all about us. They are multiplying at twice the rate of the general population, and not until we recognize this fact, and work on this basis, will we begin to solve these social problems.<sup>19</sup>

Essentially, these “feeble-minded” people were deemed to be incapable of healthy interpersonal relationships and punished for it by being deprived of the possibility of improving their social skills through integration in society. Attributing socioeconomic disadvantage to character flaws, Goddard did not see the ways in which “illegitimate children” and “unwed mothers” might be stigmatized that could limit their opportunities for success in life. This imagined social threat could be mitigated by institutionalizing or worse, sterilizing such people.

In the United States, the destructive policies that accompanied such theories were successfully challenged in the Supreme Court, which ruled in favour of Carrie Buck, a young woman sterilized against her will.<sup>20</sup> Later in his career, Goddard admitted that he was wrong to call for measures to limit the capacity of “feeble-minded people” to conceive and bear children.<sup>21</sup> By a couple of decades later, studies were acknowledging that many children labelled as “feeble-minded” had become fully functionally adults, holding down jobs and finding spouses.<sup>22</sup> While a narrow group of people might have difficulty making friends because of a severe psychiatric condition, difficulties forming and sustaining relationships should not be seen in itself as an individual pathology, but psychology has sometimes located these problems in innate individual deficiencies rather than regarding them within a wider societal context.<sup>23</sup>

To summarize this section, the idea of friendship has historically been imbued with society’s prejudices about people – friendship is the preserve of the “best” people (who are actually the most privileged people). If one assumes, even subconsciously, that friendship must be earned, and therefore is only available to the most deserving, then there is a bias at work. To hold this bias, one must overlook the possibility that some cruel and selfish people might have friends, while some good people have none. Worse, perhaps, one runs the risk of judging harshly people who are friendless and assuming falsely that they lack character or empathy.

Another group of people that until recently was regarded as lacking the capacity for friendship was individuals living with autism:

The dominant psychological and neurological models continue to emphasize the absence of empathy.... Adults with autism disagree, but they do so within the terms already set. They say they experience empathy but arrive at it and express it in ways that are difficult for neurotypicals to recognize... autism can mean, in practical terms, that an individual is less tightly bound into the network of relationships that sustain most of us.<sup>24</sup>

In the twentieth century, autism was initially identified as an incapacity to form and sustain interpersonal relationships. Initially seen as a variant of intellectual disability, then as a psychological pathology resulting from bad parenting, autism is now seen as a neurological syndrome that affects sensory experience and interpersonal communication.<sup>25</sup> Studies of children on the autism spectrum say they often report having few or no friends and that they wish they had more friends than they have.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, people with traumatic brain injuries in a study reported losing friends after their injury, that people treated them as less intelligent, had little patience for the patients’ process of working through speech or memory deficits, or felt uncomfortable around them.<sup>27</sup> Another study of

traumatic brain injury patients reported similar findings, as TBI patients sometimes had issues with communication or with emotional regulation that their friends couldn't accept.<sup>28</sup>

### **Harms of Deprivation of Friendship**

People may find themselves without friends, or without close friends, for reasons beyond their control: family crisis, having to move house often, being chronically ill, being overworked or working in isolating jobs.<sup>29</sup> In Chapter 2, we discussed the evidence in favour of the benefits of friendship. People without friendship may find themselves without these benefits. The fact of exclusion from a community can lead to harms to the individual: loneliness, a feeling of insecurity, a feeling of powerlessness, of being considered inferior.<sup>30</sup>

A study of teenagers in Italy found that immigrants are more likely to report having few or no friends than Italian-born youth with Italian parents, and that on the whole they have fewer friends than the Italians. While the researcher observed that this may be in part due to recent arrivals being not fluent in Italian, she also found that few Italian-born children have *any* immigrant friends.<sup>31</sup> Whether this means that the Italian children were prejudiced is not really the point; the point is that there is a large group of people who lack friendship, although we know that this causes harms. An ethnographic study of schoolchildren showed that children who were excluded felt unhappy about the exclusion, which was at times very overt, and at other times, children might simply appear not to have noticed a child who tried to join a group.<sup>32</sup>

### **Friendship and Favouritism**

Hierarchies of friendship may also be seen in the evidence of who has more friends than others and who befriends whom. People who lack friends may lack the benefits of social capital, putting them at a disadvantage. This is one reason why comparative politics scholars have argued that the modern state should be impartial and that extending preferential treatment to one's friends is unfair. Some philosophers have endeavoured to define the circumstances where one must be neutral: implementing the rule of law, spending public funds, or exercising power when people's livelihoods are at stake.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, it is appropriate to prefer one's friends when no one else is hurt, and where because of your intimacy with that person, you can help your friend more easily than a stranger.<sup>34</sup> Notes Sarah Stroud, while helping those one knows well is justifiable on the basis that no one has unlimited time, there may be people who need help who don't have anyone that they can call upon.<sup>35</sup> This stance is ethical, insofar as it is better to help somebody than to help nobody. However, it

leaves open the question of who will provide the benefits of friendship to those who don't currently enjoy access to it, and what will be the consequences of this absence for those people.

Furthermore, what does it mean to give a friend preferential treatment in a way that doesn't harm others? Do we know for certain what are the hidden, intangible consequences of such preferential treatment? For example, if one socializes with certain neighbours and not others, what may seem to one person to be trivial chatting might feel like exclusion to those neighbours who are not drawn into the circle. Suppose one learns of an opportunity for professional advancement, and they happen to mention it first to a co-worker, whom they see every day rather than another co-worker who works from home due to a disability. Does this casual comment to a proximate person have no harms to the person who learns the news last, and has less time to apply for the opportunity? Or suppose one declines to make time for somebody who might need one's help simply because that person annoys one: is the person probing sufficiently whether the cause of the annoyance might be factors beyond the person's control, such as the way they speak or a difficulty coping with mood swings? In short, might "personal tastes" in friendship might be culturally conditioned, even discriminatory?

One study carried out among small children (kindergarten age) suggested that it is not necessarily "natural" to prefer one's friends to one's non-friends and single them out for special treatment. The researchers found that given opportunities to share with other children, the youngsters favoured distribution that ensured that every child received something and only gave their best friends a little extra if they knew that nobody was left out.<sup>36</sup> Such research suggests that favouritism is a learned behaviour.

### **Cliquism and Ostracism**

It is one thing if some individuals are left out of friendship networks and feel overlooked and isolated. It is another thing if individuals are actively excluded or ostracized by those who enjoy the benefits of friendship. In 1950, sociologist David Riesman published *The Lonely Crowd*, along with collaborators Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney. Like Talcott Parsons, he was interested in the shifting dynamics of social interactions in modern capitalist society: people were becoming less oriented towards friends, more oriented towards attaining success for themselves and their families. Focussing on the United States, Reisman argued that "inner-directed" individuals played a crucial role in the development of a modern, economically sophisticated society. These individuals were intrinsically motivated freethinkers, who set lofty goals for themselves and were relatively

uninterested in what other people thought of them. These people were the trailblazers who made the scientific and cultural advances that provided the foundation for growing prosperity, enabling their less talented peers to enjoy a comfortable middle-class life.<sup>37</sup>

Riesman described “inner-directed” people fondly as chess-playing introverts, content with the company of one or two friends. They were nerds, in other words. But a troubling phenomenon emerged: instead of these nerds being celebrated by others, their more conformist classmates and colleagues turned on them. According to Riesman, “inner-directed” people often face bullying or exclusion by popularity-seeking people who cannot accept those who are unconventional:

[T]he fate of many inner-directed children is loneliness in and outside the home. Home, school and waystations between may be places for hazing, persecution, misunderstanding. No adult intervenes on behalf of the lonely or hazed children to proffer sympathy, ask questions, or give advice.... Often the children, unaware that they have rights to friendship, understanding or agreeable play, unaware, indeed that the adults could be greatly interested in such matters -- suffer in silence and submit to the intolerable.<sup>38</sup>

Why would inner-directed people be treated this way? According to Riesman, it has something to do with envy of those who have exceptional abilities, which are an advantage in a competitive society; but it has more to do with the pressures in an affluent society to accumulate popularity in the same way that one conspicuously accumulates consumer goods. The “outer-directed” people, who are highly attuned to what other people are doing, find comfort in following the herd, and are suspicious of those who appear to flout convention.<sup>39</sup>

Riesman may have simplified the categories of postwar society, but nevertheless, he was making an important argument: people may find themselves friendless not because of any action or omission on their part but because others soothe their anxiety about the future by finding unusual people who they can label as odd. Furthermore, these exclusions begin in childhood and are reinforced in society as a whole, which has come to value a myth of an agreeable social order over a vibrant society where passions are expressed and diversity thrives.<sup>40</sup> In this atmosphere, choosing one person to befriend may be a neutral matter of proximity and personal taste. But if it means choosing to befriend one person while shunning another, then that is political.

Indeed, some of the leading democratic theorists have touched on the theme of ostracism and exclusion, precisely because they feared that a narrow-minded, intolerant mentality could develop among the comfortable

majority, and work to the detriment of those who marched to a different drummer. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, John Stuart Mill advocated for the essential role that odd people played in society:

Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage which it contained. That so few no dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time.<sup>41</sup>

Mill wrote of the tension that can exist under democracy, when the majority of people could be so self-satisfied with their (similar) minds that they could turn those with extraordinary minds into outcasts:

Persons of genius, is is true, are, and are always likely to be a small minority; but in order to have them, it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow. Genius can only breathe freely in an atmosphere of freedom. Persons of genius are, *ex vi termini*, more individual than any other people – less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character.<sup>42</sup>

A key measure of the degree of freedom in a society, for Mill, was its ability to tolerate, indeed nurture, those who are “eccentric.” Eccentric people are driven by curiosity, which can lead people to make the world a better place; but more to the point, without the freedom of the individual be who one truly is, there can be no freedom for anyone.<sup>43</sup> In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that although Americans had many democratic characteristics, they could be remarkably intolerant of original or unorthodox ideas:

In America the majority raises very formidable barriers to the liberty of opinion: within these barriers an author may write whatever he pleases, but he will repent it if he ever steps beyond them.... Before he published his opinions he imagined that he held them in common with many others; but no sooner has he declared them openly than he is loudly censured by his overbearing opponents, while those who think without having had the courage to speak, like him, abandon him in silence.<sup>44</sup>

The freethinker may be shunned, even blacklisted.

This is not to say that those who are disliked or shunned are all intellectually gifted. As Riesman pointed out, nerds were ridiculed not because

of their high intelligence alone, but because intelligence had *lost status* in society once a comfortable life became more accessible to those with average abilities. People may perceive lower-status people as undesirable friends. Worse, Martha Nussbaum argued that people who are vulnerable may be avoided by others, even rendered as objects of disgust or regarded as not fully human. We are drawn or repelled to people not purely for “natural” reasons but because we have been socialized to see some kinds of people as more desirable than others. In particular, people with disabilities may be belittled or excluded because fully abled people are uncomfortable with the fact of their own mortality: they seek to distance themselves from the reality that they themselves could become disabled in the blink of an eye.<sup>45</sup> As Nussbaum wrote,

Now that people with disabilities are increasingly writing scholarship about their social situation, it is becoming possible to take the measure of the isolation and marginalization imposed on them, and the extent of their routine humiliations.<sup>46</sup>

A humane society, she wrote, “should actively protect the individual who may want a place of retreat from the shame that inevitably will continue to attach to unusual people and behaviour.”<sup>47</sup> Retreating to solitude may spare an individual from taunts and bullying but will not address the loneliness they may face. Better still would be if such a society could confront their prejudices and approach those who are different, in the spirit of friendship.

Similarly, Charles Taylor argued that democracies may embrace inclusion in principle, but in practice “inner exclusion” can occur when some groups, especially the majority, appoint themselves as gatekeepers of what it means to be a member of the community. They may define national identity based on a version of community that does not exist, and which does not include members of minorities, such as immigrants. Taylor calls for democracy to be seen as something that is realized in relationships between people, rather than simply the rights of an individual.<sup>48</sup>

A public place that claims to be inclusive may contain invisible ostracism. One researcher observed social interaction in a Russian-speaking pub in London, England, which provided a “welcoming” environment for Russian-speakers. However, in practice, ethnic Russians (including pub staff) gossiped about and made fun of non-ethnic Russian customers, not particularly subtly. Thus the freedom to visit the bar and find fellowship was belied by an ethnocentric snobbery.<sup>49</sup> Public places that purport to be open can therefore be sites where some people are belittled.

Who is at risk of ostracism? In addition to the eccentrics and nonconformists discussed earlier, empirical research suggests that members of minority groups, or those perceived as having atypical behaviours, are

often targets. Arunima Roy et al found that children with ADHD were more likely to be disliked and bullied in school than those who did not.<sup>50</sup> Dominic P. Tannoia and A. Michele Lease found that children in classes where there were few children with behaviours associated with ADHD tended to dislike fellow pupils who behaved as if they had difficulty focusing their attention – but that this dislike didn't hold if there was a critical mass of pupils who self-identified as having difficulties with attention.<sup>51</sup> Douglas W. Nangle et al. found that children who behave in a way different from others are more likely to be disliked, and that those who are disliked by a group tend to stay disliked for a long time.<sup>52</sup>

Such findings suggest that disliking isn't a matter of simply personal taste but is a socially conditioned, herd phenomenon. In an effort to determine what factors determine which teenagers are disliked by their peers, some researchers found that people often dislike those their friends tell them to dislike, even if they don't know them well, and that the disliked person is often someone seen as a rival or object of envy to the original dislike.<sup>53</sup> The work by Gijs Huitsing et al., also of children, showed that a group of friends tend to identify the same person to dislike, that rival groups tend to dislike each other, and that people who are disliked by many people tend to become friends with each other. Only a small number of children were neither liked nor disliked.<sup>54</sup> Evidence has been found that preteens who are excluded from cliques were at higher risk of depression later in life. The same study showed that cliques are not ubiquitous in school life; they exist in some contexts and not others.<sup>55</sup> Another analysis found that children who are anxious or have behavioural issues are more likely to be friendless. Children with anxiety were likely to be friendless and especially vulnerable to bullying.<sup>56</sup> Research on children in Grade 6 in California found that 12 percent reported having no friends at all, and that African-Americans and Latinos were over-represented in this group compared to White children.<sup>57</sup> Yet another study on children ages 10–18 found that girls were more likely to choose friends who are similar to them and to seek to join cliques rather than befriending individuals.<sup>58</sup>

An influential examination by Raj Chetty *et al* observed that friendships only infrequently include people from different social classes of one's own: partly because classes tend to occupy separate spaces (live in different neighbourhoods, do not work alongside each other) but also because people do not seek out members of other classes for friendships. The researchers called this “friending bias.”<sup>59</sup> Ian Barron's research on children in kindergarten found that they made friends primarily with those who shared their ethnicity and gender; they bonded with each other over familiar cultural practices, such as religious holidays or vacation spots.<sup>60</sup> Older children tended to have children from a similar racial background.<sup>61</sup> In a study in German high schools: “Students were more likely to be friends when

they share the same ethnic origin, the same sex, the same neighbourhood, or belong to the same class in the grade.”<sup>62</sup> Even more troubling, a summary of research findings of a survey of schoolchildren concluded that the older children were, the fewer friends of another race they had.<sup>63</sup> A survey of affluent women in England found that their prosperous incomes helped them to maintain their friendships; they had cars, money to spend on entertainment, and could afford babysitters.<sup>64</sup> For working women with more modest incomes, sustaining a friendship on more than an occasional basis, then, might require more resources than they have.

Another friendship advantage is found in people who are considered good-looking. A study of schoolchildren found that these people were pursued for friendship and rarely sought out friends on their own. The same was true of wealthier children, who were unlikely to befriend peers from more modest backgrounds.<sup>65</sup> Age can also be a barrier to friendship. Old people in one study reported that they felt that people held stereotypical beliefs about elderly people, that they were frail or grouchy, for example.<sup>66</sup> Other elderly people though were able to keep making friends throughout their lives, even when they outlived friends from their age group.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

A friendship between two people may feel very personal to them, but the ability of a friendship to form is influenced by social and political factors. Affluence, physical attractiveness, and able-bodiedness are advantages in the search for friendship, while people who have socioeconomic disadvantages find it harder to find friends. Furthermore, those who stand out from the pack because of unusual behaviours or exceptional abilities may find themselves deprived of friendship. Empirical evidence confirms what philosophers have long known: that the eccentric or “different” person may pay the high cost of friendlessness and the higher cost of ostracism, even in a democracy where differences are supposed to be accepted. Having friends is about more than social skills: a government concerned about loneliness should take a hard look at the factors that leave some people behind in the race to acquire friends. As the next chapter will point out, one must also scrutinize the factors in contemporary society that drive friends apart.

## Notes

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## 4 Systemic Causes of the Erosion of Friendship

In the Hungarian film “Some Birds” (2023), an unlikely friendship forms among two people living in precarity: an elderly gentleman, Bela, who has reluctantly moved into a nursing home, and Zoé, a high school student doing community service in the nursing home following an unspecified encounter with the juvenile justice system. The two bond when they raid the home’s refrigerator late at night, and they begin to spend time together inside and outside of the home. The gentleman enlists the girl’s help in a failed petition to return to independent life; she buys him new socks – the only thing she can afford – to help him make a good impression on social workers. But the two individuals are regarded by authorities as a bad influence on each other: they are separated when the girl is reassigned to complete her community service in another institution. Each has a precarious social status that ultimately leaves them powerless to challenge judgemental bureaucrats who deny them one of the most basic acts of human agency: the ability to spend time with a friend of one’s own choosing.

Film, *Valami Madarak (Some Birds)*. Director Dániel Hevér, Screenplay by Kertész Zsanett. Hungary: Filmfabriq, 2023.

As the film *Some Birds* demonstrated, people can become estranged from each other by factors beyond their control; Bela and Zoé are decades apart in age, but it is a pure friendship. There is no suggestion in the film that Bela has a romantic interest in Zoé, nor that Zoé, raised by a single mother, sees Bela as a father figure. The two are quiet, plainspoken people who enjoy simple pleasures together, such as eating fast food. And yet,

third parties, overly fixated on their financial liability in the event that Bela suffers a fall, have decided for Bela and Zoé that their bond doesn't matter.

In Chapter 1, we identified ways in which pioneering thinkers acknowledged that the transformation of interpersonal relationships created challenges for democracy and political stability. What is less acknowledged was the possibility that relationships were not necessarily weakening "naturally" but that they were being destroyed. The processes associated with modernity downgraded the importance of interpersonal relationships. To a great extent, modernization was a euphemism for capitalism. To be clear, capitalism need not necessarily sacrifice relationships to the cause of profit and efficiency. The eighteenth-century philosopher of capitalism, Adam Smith, celebrated friendship in his writing. Good character and a friendly openness towards others ought to prevail, he held; those blessed by good fortune had an obligation to display kindness. Yet Emile Durkheim, discussed in Chapter 1, argued that capitalism was foundered over its lack of a set of principles to compel honourable behaviour. As discussed in Chapter 2, Durkheim observed that the development of large-scale manufacturing in northern Europe was accompanied by a sharp rise in suicides, a phenomenon which he attributed to the displacement of individuals from rural communities to more impersonal industrial settings. A few decades later, the twentieth-century liberal philosopher John Dewey called for government action to rein in the tendencies of the wealthy to gatekeep their privileges.

The problem with capitalism and friendship is as follows. First, it is essential to distinguish the theory of how capitalism works from the practical way that it has been implemented in the real world and the processes that it set in motion. Durkheim's concern with capitalism began with what the empirical data on northern Europe in the late nineteenth century showed him. While the displacing effects of capitalism could be addressed, in the absence of action, those unsettling trends would be likely to continue as industrial modernization advanced. Karl Marx, who was concerned less with interpersonal relationships than with the impoverishment and dispossession of the working class, saw revolution as the only remedy to the pernicious effects of capitalism. Second, there is the problem of responsibility. As we saw in Chapter 1, some of the leading voices in comparative politics were reluctant to name capitalism directly as a system that ruined relationships, and even implied that the lost relationships of rural folk were not worth replacing. Provided a strong state was in place, people would simply adjust to having shallow relationships and one-dimensional interactions with others. This assumption overlooked the possibility that people would be continually displaced and never experience a "new normal."

The final problem relates to the secondary processes associated with capitalism, such as urban sprawl, the building of superhighways, and the relocation of people from downtown “slums.” As Jane Jacobs wrote years ago, such processes eroded existing relationships and reduced opportunities for people to have amicable, quotidian interactions. Before her death in 2015, Jacobs provided empirical data that, sadly, her predictions had come to pass in the United States.<sup>1</sup> These secondary processes, enabled by deliberate policy decisions, implicated government in the breakdown of relationships in the twentieth century and beyond.

In the twenty-first century, governments are now recognizing that social isolation and loneliness pose threats to public health and social cohesion. The discussion initiated by Jane Jacobs of how to restore lively social communities has continued as governments experiment with policies to alleviate loneliness and revitalize neighbourhoods. Chapter 5 will discuss some of the paths forward to building friendship. However, it is doubtful whether policies to build friendship could succeed unless those policies also seek to reverse existing trends that threaten existing personal ties. Therefore, this chapter will examine the debate over the systemic causes that weaken friendships.

### **Capitalism and Friendship: Smith, Durkheim, and Marx**

As Nina Tzouvala argued, the modern understanding of capitalism is to a considerable extent drawn from the theories of Karl Marx, who saw it as a system based on the establishment of private property, where an individual’s right to hold exclusive rights to property was defined under law. Those who owned property were able to use it in order to establish profit-making businesses and accumulate wealth, which depended on their ability to employ workers and pay them relatively low wages. Because businesses competed with each other to sell their goods to buyers, they had an incentive to pay their workers low wages in order to stay afloat. Tzouvala describes capitalism as “a civilisation” because it depended on a set of legal principles to justify making money at the expense of other people.<sup>2</sup>

Adam Smith, the philosopher who provided an articulate defence of free-market capitalism was ostensibly in favour of the benefits of competition. However, competition between businesses did not necessarily require cutthroat rivalry between individuals. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith insisted that people, especially the wealthy, need to approach other human beings with kindness and compassion:

One individual must never prefer himself so much even to any other individual, as to hurt or injure that other, in order to benefit himself,

though the benefit to the one should be much greater than the hurt or injury to another.<sup>3</sup>

Smith considered friendship to be essential to an ethical life, and not the kind of friendship that provided a fan club to tell someone what they wanted to hear. Friendship, wrote Smith, helps to keep a person grounded in society and curb their inclination to become self-absorbed and preoccupied with one's own desires.<sup>4</sup>

Friendship, in short, ought to mitigate the potential for greed in a person who enjoyed good fortune, and friends should call out the rich man who did not behave generously:

We should have little respect for a private gentleman who did not exert himself to gain an estate, or even a considerable office, when he could acquire them without either meanness or injustice.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Smith posited no limit to the quality and quantity of friends one could have in life:

The attachment which is founded upon the love of virtue ... need not be confined to a single person, but may safely embrace all the wise and virtuous, with whom we have been long and intimately acquainted, and upon whose wisdom and virtue we can, upon that account entirely depend. They who would confine friendship to two persons, seem to confound the wise security of friendship with the jealousy and folly of love.<sup>6</sup>

Capitalism then need not thrive on greed and cruelty, and those who were blessed by wealth were obliged to be kind to others. But Smith did not really address the question of whether one person's wealth, especially the generation of new wealth, might require that others give something up involuntarily. By contrast, Emile Durkheim observed that capitalism involved dispossession, and dispossession involved not only a loss of property, but a loss of relationships.

Durkheim argued that the very nature of private property depended on exclusion: one individual's claim to have exclusive control over land or resources, fencing it off or otherwise denying others the right to use them, a claim upheld by law.<sup>7</sup> As capitalism developed, Durkheim argued, business owners were distinct from other professions and from tradespeople because they had no defined code of ethics and no inherent sense of duty towards their community.<sup>8</sup> With industrialists in competition with each other, and workers entering factories' employ as individuals, there were no rules or agreements in place to ensure that people had a common set of understandings of how to treat each other. Wrote Durkheim,

It is therefore extremely important that economic life should be regulated, should have its moral standards raised, so that conflicts that disturb it have an end, and further, that individuals should cease to live thus within a moral vacuum where the life-blood drains away even from individual morality.<sup>9</sup>

Durkheim raised particular concerns about inherited wealth, which enabled ownership without a sense of duty to others and could lead to an accumulation of wealth that would enable exploitation.<sup>10</sup>

Durkheim pointed to particular ways in which this problem could be alleviated: in his view, it was natural for human beings to gravitate towards friendship and community with others, and to find agreement on a shared set of ethical standards. This sense of community couldn't be forced but arises naturally from people who work or gather together.<sup>11</sup> A democratic state, he argued, could play a role, if not in encouraging interpersonal warmth, then in aggregating a sense of shared morality: "it is natural that the political structure should reflect the way in which we ourselves form into groups of our own accord."<sup>12</sup> Durkheim was somewhat optimistic that interpersonal friendship and political equality would advance hand in hand, as they were related; the more a person realized their own worth as having the same human value as others, the more they would find companionship with others:

We have not yet reached the day when man can love all his fellow-creatures as brothers, whatever their faculties, their intellect or their moral values. Nor has man reached the stage when he has shed his egotism so successfully that it is no longer necessary to put a tentative price on merit (a price likely to decline). ... On the other hand, it is certain that the depth of feeling of human fraternity will go on increasing, and that the best amongst men are capable of working without getting an exact recompense for their pains and services.<sup>13</sup>

For this to happen though, there needed to be a transformation away from the valuing of unearned privileges, including the privileges of wealth. Meanwhile, there would be a constant tension between those driven by avarice and those who sought meaningful fellowship with others. The decline of relationships in modern life was at its essence a problem of individual ethics, but government action could offset its most harmful consequences. Although Durkheim did not define specifically what government action could do, he argued that the costs of inaction would be great; if a political community did not strive for what he called "organic solidarity," political stability could not be guaranteed, and violence could result.<sup>14</sup>

The likelihood for capitalism to end in violent revolution was the prediction of Karl Marx. Unlike Durkheim, however, Marx paid relatively little attention to interpersonal relationships, although he had also argued that they were weakened by capitalism insofar that industrial workers experienced a loss of individual identity. During the working day, the worker's labour "belongs to another; it is the loss of his self."<sup>15</sup> Interpersonal relationships then can only exist in a meaningful way when the individual is able to make free choices. Interpersonal relationships might be possible then outside the workplace. But Marx didn't tell us why these relationships matter.

Later in the text, Marx finally approached the topic of friendship, without using the word:

When communist workmen associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc. is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need – the need for society – and what appears as a means becomes an end. You can observe this practical process in its most splendid results whenever you see French socialist workers together. Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc. are no longer means of contact or means that bring together. Company association, and conversation, which again has society at its end, are enough for them, the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies.<sup>16</sup>

So friendship was important to Marx, but it emerges on its own when workers associate with each other to achieve an end. In *The German Ideology*, Marx wrote,

Only in community [with others has each] individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore is personal freedom possible.... In the real community the individuals attain their freedom in and through their association.<sup>17</sup>

In – and only in – interpersonal relations, the human being finds fulfilment. But for Marx, such fulfilment could be found only when capitalism was eliminated.

To be fair, it isn't only capitalism that destroys friendships but also a process where large-scale industrial development occurs in a way that fails to take into account the human cost, as Hannah Arendt suggested. In the Soviet Union, Stalinism arose from the isolation of the working class and the impoverishment of the peasantry which persisted after the Russian Revolution.<sup>18</sup> As Neera Badhwar argued, echoing Adam Smith, capitalism

does not necessarily have to be unfriendly, as principles such as fairness, reciprocity, and voluntary contracts as part of capitalism. The injustices of capitalism come from unscrupulous practitioners.<sup>19</sup> Arguably, it is power, not capitalism per se, that has destructive impacts – the power to displace and separate people from each other and the power to impede efforts to ameliorate those isolating impacts. And yet, since capitalism is the dominant economic system in our twenty-first century world, it is fair to hold it responsible if its beneficiaries have done an inadequate job of addressing the problems that capitalism has left in its wake.

Zygmunt Bauman argued that although there was an awareness during twentieth-century capitalism that there was a loss of community relationships, capitalists nevertheless were wary of workers' independently forming their own solidarities with each other. Business leaders understood the need for social interaction at the workplace but wanted to control it so that workers would not form unruly or disruptive labour movements.<sup>20</sup> A basic mistrust of employees often prevailed; as the twentieth-century drew to a close, downsizing and subcontracting provided constant disruption to interpersonal relationships at workplaces, making it more difficult for workers to engage in collective action. At the same time, business leaders and owners have removed themselves from contact with ordinary people to an unprecedented degree, through exclusive housing arrangements and frequent travel.<sup>21</sup> Bauman therefore posited that the weakening of horizontal social relationships was quite intentional, at least when it comes to private companies, though he is at pains to point out that there are exceptions to the rule. Evidence suggests that when friendship is encouraged at work, employees are more productive, stay with the same employer longer, and enjoy their work.<sup>22</sup>

Another claim that has been advanced is that friendship has suffered in the modern world because consumption of goods, aggressively marketed under capitalism, has become more important to many people than their relationships. The desire to acquire and to earn more money to acquire more items, crowds out time for social interaction. Furthermore, the rise of television and other forms of home-based entertainment takes people away from social settings.<sup>23</sup> The problem with this position is that the empirical mechanism of how this occurs is not clear. Has it been established scientifically that people see commodities as replacements for human contact? Or do people acquire consumer goods for other reasons, such as to demonstrate status? If the latter, acquiring goods might be a way to try to bid for particular kinds of relationships by impressing people, for example.

In 1961, Jane Jacobs wrote her influential book where she observed that postwar trends in city planning were eroding community in preexisting neighbourhoods. Jacobs wrote,

A good city street neighbourhood achieves a marvel of balance between its people's determination to have essential privacy and their simultaneous wishes for differing degrees of contact, enjoyment or help from the people around.<sup>24</sup>

Jacobs posited that urban neighbourhoods evolved at a time when most people did not rely on cars to do errands, and regular contact with familiar faces on the street provided a sense of safety and interdependence for residence. The building of highways through residential areas cut people off from their neighbours and made those areas less walkable. Residential developments, such as large-scale planned communities replacing tenements, reduced existing public spaces where people could congregate and replaced known neighbours with strangers. Jacobs stated explicitly that her concern was not with friendship *per se* but with the loss of quotidian conversation with familiar acquaintances and the replacement of trusted communal spaces with ugly, possibly unsafe thoroughfares. Governments were directly responsible for these outcomes because of decisions that failed to take into account the mutual support and social intercourse that could be found in downtowns. Jacobs, who used the term "social capital" long before Robert Putnam discussed its importance to democracy, feared the consequences of a neglect of urban community. Those consequences could include a weakening of informal social safety nets, increased mistrust among those who lived alongside one another, and crime that could flourish in desolate areas such as highway underpasses.<sup>25</sup> As people moved to suburbs and spent more time in cars, they had fewer interactions, while many once-vibrant urban communities languished.<sup>26</sup>

In the book published before her death, Jacobs provided evidence that her worst predictions had come to pass in North American cities. Jacobs observed that people had "forgotten" that cars were not always considered essential, arguing that the automobile industry had lobbied hard for policies that encouraged automobile use. As another example, when cities eliminated "slums" under the guise of social improvement, promised new housing often did not appear for years. For Jacobs, the erosion of community did not rest with a single cause or political actor but with ignorance and indifference to the value of promoting sustainable communities.<sup>27</sup> The availability of automobiles and other forms of mechanized transport have reduced people's social interactions within their neighbourhoods.<sup>28</sup> Mark J. Dunkelman went even further, positing that the decline in day-to-day interpersonal contacts in the United States contributed to political polarization and animosity: people simply no longer know each other.<sup>29</sup>

Loneliness is intensified by trends within the working world that discourage or erode friendship. In 2006, a researcher with Gallup observed that polls showed that many people reported that friendships in the

workplace were frowned on by their employers, especially between supervisors and their subordinates.<sup>30</sup> As companies downsize or restructure, people may put friendships aside in order to prioritize maintaining a stable income. Alison Pugh's research on working mothers in Washington, DC, showed that many of them felt obliged to spend a lot of time upgrading their skills and working on their appearance and visibility, so as to remain "competitive" in the job market. They often lamented friends lost when they were laid off from their jobs, assigned chaotic work schedules, or moved to accept work elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> In a study of women in England, another researcher found that women largely maintained their friendships with other women, but found that it required a lot of time spent juggling their family responsibilities so as to have "girls' nights' out." The participants, however, were wealthy and had the resources to maintain their friendships.<sup>32</sup> Argues Mihalis Mentinis, friendship is used to sell products, promoting the idea that friendship should involve doing expensive activities together and buying costly gifts.<sup>33</sup> Social interactions, if even necessary, can be purchased by those with means.<sup>34</sup>

Precarious work and transient living interfere with friendship. In a study of itinerant urban workers in the informal sector in Kenya and South Africa, Loren B. Landau found that the workers not only find it hard to make friends, but they often avoid making the kind of peer attachments that they know they will be unable to sustain when they have to move on to another place. Their vulnerability as isolated, undocumented individuals may discourage them from social contact, as they often wished to minimize their visibility in public settings.<sup>35</sup>

### **An End to Capitalist Disruption?**

As Chapter 2 discussed, comparative politics scholars acknowledged that the processes of modernization had a negative impact on interpersonal relationships. However, they largely assumed that this impact would be temporary, as lost ties would be replaced by new identities. This chapter suggests that these interpersonal impacts are ongoing, a product of a capitalism based on endless disruption, enabled by policies that prioritize efficient movement of people and goods over the preservation of social networks. While it is now being recognized that social isolation has reached a level that is costly, efforts to alleviate loneliness do not necessarily address its systemic causes. It is argued here that policies to address social isolation need to not only help individuals but take steps to reverse the ongoing systemic processes that separate people from one another.

Furthermore, it is one thing to soothe loneliness; it is another thing entirely to build friendships. Although we have discussed here some of the characteristics of friendship, the actual process of how two people can become friends is not something that can be reliably compelled by a third

party, as friendships continue to be found among people who have little in common. What governments can do is to acknowledge that friendship-building is good for society and then design policies to try to create the conditions for friendships to form. Governments can create opportunities for friendship in the same way that they can advance equality of opportunity for equity-seeking groups. But if there are powerful political forces who benefit from the weakening of interpersonal relationships – as Hannah Arendt suggested in her work on totalitarianism<sup>36</sup> – then stimulating friendship may be a radical act of defiance. Friendship may need to be not mandated, but *fomented*: regarded as a precious resource, nurtured, *allowed* to bubble and mature.

## Notes

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## 5 How to Foment Friendship

Friendship is not an outcome; it is a process. As a relationship between living human beings, a friendship is a living entity in its own right. It is not a product to be created, or a transaction to be completed, but a dynamic, evolving conversation that unfolds over time. Therefore, the role of government can be to encourage the conditions that allow friendships to develop and prosper. In the words of Todd May,

A friendship is not based on the happenstance of sharing and passion, one that seems no more than a stroke of good luck. Rather it involves what we might call a tending to, in the sense that one tends to one's garden.<sup>1</sup>

A garden can be quickly destroyed by deliberate or careless acts, and a key to a flourishing garden is letting plants grow.

Thus far, we have established the following propositions:

- Friendship is beneficial to the individual, and to society as a whole.
- However, the benefits of friendship to society have been undervalued by modern politics, who have inadequately acknowledged the friendship-destroying features of modern life.
- While political philosophers such as Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida recognized that friendship was essential for democratic life, the subfield of comparative politics has, until recently, underestimated the ways in which socioeconomic change has created friendship losses that may be irreplaceable.
- Loneliness and social isolation are finally being recognized as serious challenges to health and social cohesion, and addressing those painful psychological states is an appropriate object of public policy. But the question of how to stimulate friendships on a societal level, as opposed to alleviating loneliness, is a challenging problem that requires an evidence basis that, as yet, is underdeveloped.

- Finally, a consideration of a friendship-based policy requires a sober, unflinching examination of the sources of cruelty in today's liberal democracies: ostracism, discrimination, displacement, and precarity all contribute to the pain of friendlessness among the socially disadvantaged groups who disproportionately experience it.

The question of government encouragement of friendship goes to the heart of what we think government is for. It falls within the realm of a progressive, liberal view of government, such as described by John Dewey. For Dewey, friendship *per se* was not a prominent theme; however, he did call for social policies that went beyond alleviating poverty, observing that people realized their full potential when in interaction with others.<sup>2</sup> In the liberal vision of government advanced by Dewey, government needed to play an active role through redistributive policies to enable poorer citizens to have better opportunities and to be able to fulfil their goals in life. Without government action to level the playing field, rich people would continue to maintain the conditions that maintained their comfort and would look down upon those citizens who enjoyed fewer privileges.<sup>3</sup> Dewey emphasized the importance of government having evidence-based policy, based on scientific knowledge of how to improve people's lives.<sup>4</sup>

Following Dewey, one can pose two big questions:

- 1 Should government provide the conditions to make people's lives better, and to level the playing field for their opportunities for success in life?
- 2 Should governments revise their policies continuously in order to take new evidence, and new thinking, into account?

If the answer to question 1 is yes, then it follows that the answer to question 2 is also yes since it is only through knowledge, debate, and scientific discovery that one can find the best approaches to achieve the government's desired goals. It is apparent that friendship enriches the quality, even the longevity, of people's lives. It can improve their physical and mental health, expand their opportunities, and support sustainable neighbourhoods and communities. Encouraging friendship, then, falls within the realm of legitimate government activity, which complements existing policies such as universal health care and education.

Furthermore, as Graham Allen argued, governments are already involved in policies that influence people's friendships – often in a negative way. He points to the juvenile justice system and carceral institutions, where state officials find multiple ways to discourage friendships between people who are perceived to be a bad influence on each other, or to erode

trust between friends by incentivizing accused people to inform on their associates. Welfare recipients or people on probation may find their social interactions under scrutiny by the state.<sup>5</sup> For a government to encourage friendships in society at large, a diverse array of institutions might need to be reformed with a view to evidence-based approaches rather than acting upon outdated assumptions that regard certain kinds of friendships as being an inherent threat to the state.

Yet to be determined is which kinds of government actions and policies might be the most effective in stimulating the formation of concrete, supportive interpersonal relationships. We are only beginning to know the answers to these questions. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 4, social science has gained quite a good understanding of how friendships are weakened. Less is known about how friendships are built, precisely because friendships are as unique as the individuals who befriend each other. Humility then is needed about how far government can go in enabling friendships to be formed. However, few would dispute that governments can play a role in creating opportunities for people. Universal public education, progressive taxation, affirmative action policies to compensate for past racial and gender discrimination – these policies have existed for decades, even centuries, as ways to level the playing field between the privileged classes and the equity-deserving groups. Such policies may be at risk today from reactionary forces who long for their old privileges; this only reinforces the fact that norms of political equality and fairness have attained a high degree of acceptance in society. This acceptance can be temporarily set back but never permanently reversed, as the late US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg argued eloquently in her published work.<sup>6</sup>

In a world where politicians espousing hateful rhetoric, such as Donald Trump, can be elected president of the United States, it would be easy to dismiss the idea of a friendship-based politics as naïve. At the international level, actions such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 might dim the hope that the post-World War II international system can be restructured on the basis of friendly relations between states. But what is naïve is to think that human beings should be expected to pay perpetual taxes to governments without questioning how those funds are used, to simply accept a world where inequality and cruelty are inevitable features of life. To call for a friendship-based policy is to call out governments and corporations for past actions that have divided human beings for each other. What would be naïve is to think that those actions can continue unchallenged.

We do not always know exactly how to fix the problems that arise in our world, but that is not an excuse for inaction, as the French writer Albert Camus wrote in 1948:

One should not heed those moralists who said that we should fall down on our knees and abandon everything. One should merely start to move forward, in the dark, feeling one's way and trying to do good.

Albert Camus, *The Plague*. Trans. Robin Buss. Penguin Classics, 2020, p. 175.

This quotation from *The Plague* describes the approach to an unexpected crisis, as described in Camus's fictional account of a fatal epidemic disease that strikes a French Algerian town. The hero of the novel, Dr. Rieux, and a handful of friends who step up to help the townspeople, put in the work to mitigate the spread of the illness and learn gradually what works best to treat and to contain it. It is their care for the well-being of the townspeople, their desire to respect the dignity of the dying, and their willingness to take informed, measured risks that enable the disease to be contained. So then with friendship, we can take cautious steps to learn more about what policies might work best to create a richer, more caring social fabric.

Government can, and should, play a role in *fomenting* friendship. The verb "*to foment*" is chosen because it emphasizes an effort to create a new organic entity from mixing ingredients and allowing them to interact over time. In the twenty-first century, public policy discourse often uses verbs that are transactional. One could say for example, that we want to stimulate friendship, to incentivize or enable people, or to invest in relationships. These are verbs associated with neoliberalism. These terms may capture the ways in which government programmes can generate growth or provide cost-savings, but they limit the scope for imagining policies that could encourage friendships, as they prioritize policies that are instrumental, focussed as they are on a particular result. By contrast, the development of interpersonal connections requires ongoing attention. The encouragement of friendship can be conceptualized as establishing conditions for the creation of new energies, oriented towards the sustenance of an organic community of living things rather than the mechanistic generation of quantifiable results. The verb to foment is interesting because it is related to "ferment," having to do with creating something that is alive and warm, such as the making of bread, the ripening of grapes, or the brewing of beer. Fomenting can involve bubbling up, the releasing of gases, chemical reactions that alter the composition of the initial ingredients. The word "foment" became seen as politically suspicious, associated with subversion or unruly mobs.<sup>7</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary* links the original English meaning of the word "foment" with heat and warmth, in all its

best senses: to apply a soothing or healing potion to the skin. *Foment* involves a form of herbal medicine: to treat one's ailments through the calming effect of warmth.<sup>8</sup> What better metaphor could one possibly find for friendship? And yet, the word *foment* gained a pejorative connotation: why? To foment is to nurture something that is alive and growing, and therefore unpredictable. We need to reject the idea that what is vibrant and dynamic is something to be feared.

### Fomenting Friendship

Even if we acknowledge that each friendship is essentially unique (and therefore mysterious), we know more about creating friendship than we think. Figure 5.1 suggests some of the pathways towards creating a society where friendship can flourish. Friendship is wondrous, insofar as it

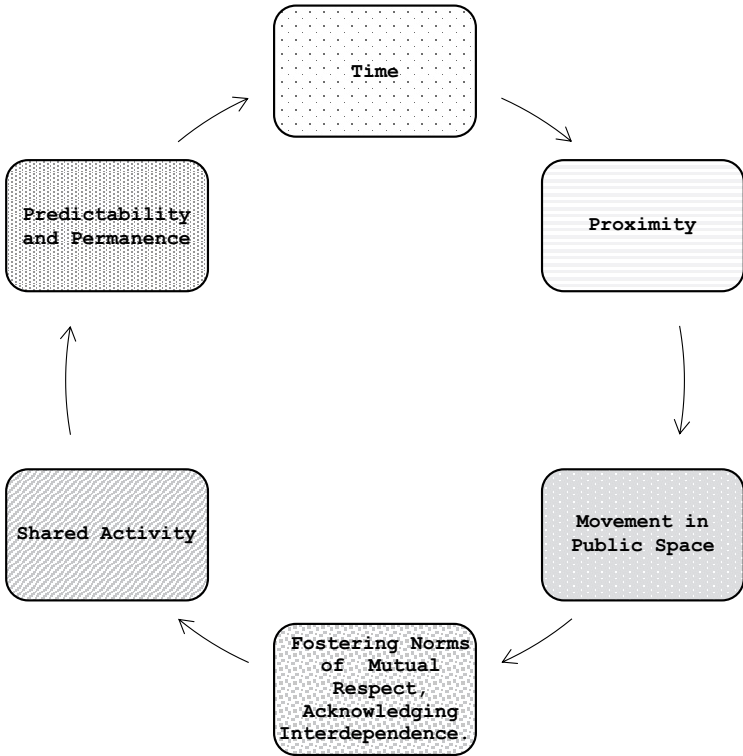


Figure 5.1 How Might Friendship Be Fomented?

can be sparked whenever two or more people are together.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, no third parties need to be involved, and governments cannot compel the creation of friendship between particular individuals. Nevertheless, they can adopt policies that support spaces where people can interact with each other frequently, to facilitate the opportunities to participate in group activities, to encourage people to befriend others, and to free up time in people's lives for socializing. That might mean taking a good hard look at what governments can do to reverse the processes that inhibit people from social interaction: among them urban sprawl, automobile transportation, precarity, and prejudice. Policies to promote friendship should not just be oriented towards those who are sociable by temperament and sufficiently able-bodied to get out and about but should have a view towards aim to create a society where everybody has at least one friend.

One of the best sources of evidence on how to create friendship comes from the field of education, where there has been increasing recognition of the importance of creating a community of learners. In their influential work *The Jigsaw Classroom*, Elliot Aronson and Stanley Patnoe analysed the results of their efforts to reduce racism by increasing contact between children of different races in Austin, Texas. They placed students in from diverse backgrounds in groups, including children identified as having learning disabilities, and required group members to work together in shared learning activities. Each student participated in various groups but was assigned to a fixed "jigsaw" group with whom they had regular contact. Over a period of time, children developed new friendships, showed better academic performance, reported being more content at school, and displayed more empathy towards their peers.<sup>10</sup> Another study of students in middle and high school found that they were more likely to develop friendships across racial lines when there was a broad array of recreational sports and clubs available at lunchtime and after school.<sup>11</sup>

Are these findings applicable to adults? In a study in India, cricket players were organized into teams which included members of different castes and compared them to teams where each member belonged to the same caste. After a period of a month of play, members of the more diverse teams developed more friendships across caste lines and showed fewer prejudices towards other castes than members of the control group teams.<sup>12</sup> The workplace is a powerful site for creating friendships between people who wouldn't necessarily have much in common in other contexts, precisely because people at work spend a lot of time together. Research shows that people who work together with members of other ethnic backgrounds are more likely to become friends with them at work than if they live in the same neighbourhood but do not work together.<sup>13</sup>

There have been experiments with stimulating friendships in adults who self-identify as experiencing loneliness. One programme, the "Friendship

Enrichment Program,” combined individual therapy with social skill-building among women. This skill-building component included attention on how to strengthen existing friendships or build friendships with people they already knew. Generally speaking, the experiment showed positive results. However, one obstacle that the authors found was a certain resistance to the idea of a plan to build friendships: that friendships should simply emerge in people’s lives.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it may be valuable to inform people that it is OK to want to form friendships deliberately, and to acknowledge openly that one is seeking new friends.

Of course, it is not only governments that can act to encourage friendships. Social movements obviously can play a critical role, often at the grassroots level. In Hamilton, Ontario, two men who once worked for the Dominion Glass Factory established an initiative to establish a park on the site of the former factory, which had shut down in the 1960s. The goal was to try to re-ignite the relationships among employees that were dissolved when the factory closed.<sup>15</sup> In Waterloo, Ontario, a street formed a committee to raise funds for planting gardens in street islands; participants think they became friends through their work in the project.<sup>16</sup> Creating friendships was an explicit goal of the Friendship Day Festival, established in 2011 in the town of Lennoxville, Quebec.<sup>17</sup> In the Brant area of Guelph, Ontario, residents established an initiative to form a “community hub” with a friendship centre and garden with the stated goal of trying to encourage social interaction in a neighbourhood with few amenities, following on the success of a similar initiative in another part of the city.<sup>18</sup> Another idea that has spread is the idea of “buddy benches” (or “friendship benches”) in parks or playgrounds. A person who wishes company can sit on a bench to signal that they would like to engage in conversation.<sup>19</sup> Collective kitchens are another idea that have shown good results in building friendships. The idea is that people who don’t have adequate kitchens in their own living space can have access to a kitchen in an institution, where they can prepare meals together with others. A study showed that participants’ sense of well-being improved, and that they built new friendships in the kitchens.<sup>20</sup>

Figure 5.1 illustrates the elements that enable friendship, according to the (admittedly limited) evidence available on this research question.

### ***Proximity***

In her work on young migrant workers in Australian cities, Anita Harris found that they didn’t need special policies to make friends with each other; they formed friends through quotidian interactions and mutual aid networks.<sup>21</sup> People don’t necessarily need government to micromanage

them into making friends. They need proximity, spaces for interaction, opportunities for familiarity. In China, the presence of neighbourhood parks in cities have become places where elderly and middle-aged people gather and make friends, sometimes in organized physical activities and other times more casually in provided seating areas.<sup>22</sup>

### *Time*

In Norway, there has been a policy experiment called “befriending”: social organizations enlist volunteers to visit socially isolated people who have requested companionship visits. The volunteers simply converse or go for walks with the person. One study found that such programmes are more satisfying if they provide the possibility of friendship – with a consistent individual who is compatible with them – rather than simply killing time to alleviate loneliness.<sup>23</sup>

A study by Jacinta Douglas showed that survivors of strokes and TBIs often experience friendship loss, which saddened them. One obstacle, she argued, is that brain rehabilitation programmes often are very time-consuming and tiring, making it hard to maintain contact with friends. She proposed that such programmes find ways to include friends and family in the rehabilitation process.<sup>24</sup> A similar recommendation was made by researchers in a study of patients with aphasia (difficulties speaking or conversing after a stroke or brain injury), that treatment of such patients should more actively include the development of conversational skills and the development of friendships.<sup>25</sup>

### *Movement in Public Space*

In his work, Eric Klinenberg followed up on the premises of Jane Jacobs, drawing together the ways in which local communities have endeavoured to build more social interaction, including mutual aid networks. Klinenberg outlined a number of practical solutions, among them building recreational pathways from abandoned railroad tracks, creating more sociable spaces and events in public libraries, renovating derelict buildings and converting them to public space, establishing outdoor playgrounds and exercise spaces aimed at adults, and measures to fund or incentivize multigenerational cooperative housing.<sup>26</sup> As the title of Klinenberg’s work suggests, the building of interpersonal friendships was not his focus; rather, it was on reversing the cycles of social isolation and mistrust in American society. However, his work speaks to the importance of addressing the systemic causes of social isolation, and the distrust that can appear between people when urban spaces become neglected and unsafe. When people go outside their homes and meet other people, some of those meetings will spark friendships which would not be formed if everyone rushed

home from work or school, avoiding others. Another project by a team of researchers found that people are more likely to have friends across different neighbourhoods, including both prosperous and less affluent ones, if public transport was able to get them to their destinations easily.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Shared Activity***

People find friends when they do things together or work together for a cause. Government need not necessarily direct or control this activity, which may in fact be critical of the government. Friendships can be built during large protests, when people find themselves meeting new people in a shared goal and help each other to keep the protest going.<sup>28</sup> In Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity in 2014, which led to the ouster of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, the protests had grown for several months, sustained by a snowballing mutual aid movement. Participants described the feeling of solidarity that emerged among people who had initially been strangers. One participant described it as "a deeply personal process.... It entailed individual and voluntary entry into a community of like others."<sup>29</sup>

Music can also bring people together. During the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy, people began singing together from their balconies, filling the streets with song.<sup>30</sup> In two programmes in East Kent and West Kent, England, singing groups formed for mental health patients was found to improve their mood and morale.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Fostering Norms of Mutual Respect, Acknowledging Interdependence***

In a study on trust, the researchers found that people were more likely to trust friends of friends that they had never met than strangers, showing the snowballing benefits of the expansion of friendship:

In a more general context, the evidence of directed trust and trustworthiness presented here suggests that a public policy that is intended to enhance social capital in a pluralistic society cannot focus solely on mixing individuals from different social groups. It should also be complemented by an effort to enhance the degree of interconnection by significantly reducing the average path length between two members of the society.<sup>32</sup>

In 2014, the Canada Safety Council held a month-long education campaign to encourage people to walk around their neighbourhoods, be aware of their neighbours and talk to them in order to reduce social isolation.<sup>33</sup> Some authors have called for people to seek new friends more openly and actively, for example by finding a church to attend regularly to

meet people.<sup>34</sup> So there may be a role for government policy, to reduce the stigma around friendship-seeking and to encourage people to take steps to broaden their friendship circles. Nevertheless, this is easier for some people to do than for others. A policy to encourage friendship cannot put the onus on the friendship-deprived person to find friends; it should also encourage those already blessed with many friends to seek out those who are alone and don't want to be alone.

*Finally, predictability and permanence* enable these friendship-promoting factors to continue. Affordable housing, stable housing and leisure time enable people to build relationships that are less frequently interrupted by dislocation.

### **A Role for National Governments**

The evidence base building friendship discussed earlier mainly relies upon small-scale local experiments, grassroots initiatives, or pilot research projects. Could there be a nationwide policy to promote friendship? This question has already been answered in the affirmative, insofar as there already have been efforts at the national level to identify loneliness as a broad-based phenomenon, and to stake out a role for the government to play. In the United Kingdom, the late Jo Cox, Labour member of Parliament, spearheaded an effort to create a multiparty commission to examine loneliness. The effort continued after Ms. Cox's untimely death by violence in 2016 and produced a report in 2017, which called for the UK government to have a policy to address loneliness, and to include more comprehensive attention to a recipient's interpersonal relationship supports when receiving social services. Significantly, they called for the government to use a more consistent, more objective operationalization of the term "loneliness" in order to be able to have good information on its prevalence and changing trends over time. The commission called for more funding for initiatives from civil society to address loneliness.<sup>35</sup>

Following up on one of the Cox Commission's recommendations, the UK government (at the time led by Prime Minister Teresa May) established what became known as the "Ministry of Loneliness." It was not actually led by a cabinet minister but was a project within the Department of Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Their stated goals were to work on a strategy for alleviating loneliness, which specifically was to include the support for research to provide more data on best practices. They called for efforts to reach out more directly to groups most experiencing loneliness, such as unemployed people and senior citizens, and perhaps most importantly to fund grassroots initiatives more generally.<sup>36</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic, however, paused much of the progress of the project's work, but the effort continued nevertheless.<sup>37</sup> What is needed is conclusive evidence of which interventions for loneliness is most effective.

Steps to address loneliness may be valuable policy, but it will not necessarily be the same kind of policy that actually creates and sustains friendship. Loneliness is an individual perception of their situation; friendship means building ongoing relationships. But what was encouraging about the Jo Cox Commission was that it established an individual's sense of community as being a matter where government had a responsibility and that good interpersonal relationships were in the public interest. Similarly, in 2023, the US surgeon general's report on loneliness called for a country-wide policy to build "connections" within society, to involve cohesion across all government departments.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it carved out a role for government to strengthen interpersonal relationships. But the report stopped short of calling for the sorts of systemic change that might reverse the decline of friendships.

For to love Friendship, it is not enough to know how to bear the other in mourning; one must love the future.

Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. London and New York: Verso, 1997, p. 47.

As Jacques Derrida's words illustrate, friendship is forward-looking; one looks forward to seeing one's friend, contributing to and sharing their happiness. Derrida called for a politics that was based on friendship as its underlying principle. A political realm based on friendship would allow people to look beyond their differences and see the humanity in each other and would be more consistent with the norm of equality that is the essence of democracy.<sup>39</sup> This is indeed a lofty vision which may never come to pass, since it seems so far away from the world we live in now. But it is nevertheless within our reach.

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