

Todd May, *Friendship in an Age of Economics: Resisting the Forces of Neoliberalism*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012; 156 pages. ISBN: 9780739175811.

Reviewed by Devin Zane Shaw  
University of Ottawa/Carleton University

Todd May is a scholar of continental philosophy who is best-known for rethinking anarchist practices through the political thought of authors such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Rancière. In *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (1994), May replaces the anthropological assumptions of 19<sup>th</sup> century anarchists such as Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin—assumptions that power is suppressive, and more specifically that power suppresses what is essentially the benign nature of human beings—with an account of political practices that conceptualizes power as productive of social bodies (of groups or individuals), knowledge, and resistance. Then, in *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière* (2008), May adopts from Rancière’s work an explicitly normative principle for conceptualizing and practicing political agency, the supposition of equality. For Rancière, politics is *by definition* egalitarian (and, although May downplays the terminology, politics is also by definition emancipatory). Rancière’s stance has two consequences that we must note for the present discussion. First, that politics is egalitarian means political struggle involves dissensus and disagreement; it interrupts and transforms what Rancière calls policing, the techniques and discourses that structure the social stratification of social roles, occupations, and the places in which these activities take on their significance. Second, the discursive and practical formulation of political tactics requires the supposition that each participant engaged in struggle is, in May’s words, “able to consider and act upon our world in such a way as to create a life that has significance for us”; a commitment to equality demands that the means of establishing the relationships that organize political engagement—May mentions solidarity, trust, and hope—must be congruent with egalitarian ends.<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, in Rancière’s terms, politics takes place when the part of those who have no part challenge the inequalities that organize social space, inequalities that stratify parts of society

according to roles based on gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and other classifications. Rancière contends, for instance, that if a regime of policing counts a worker having a part in society as being remunerated for work, the politicization of work involves introducing collective practices into social space in place of the private transaction of remuneration. As this example shows, there is no one privileged subject that preexists political struggle, nor is there a part of the social body that is absolutely excluded; instead, Rancière maintains that those who have no part become political subjects when they disrupt “contingent, or better arbitrary, and indeed unjustified” forms of domination and exploitation (130). (Rancière argues that all forms of inegalitarian social relations rest on the egalitarian—but as of yet unpoliticized—presupposition that all members of society must be equal as speaking beings. That is, even in situations of domination and exploitation, people must be equal as speakers for some to command and others to obey. Two consequences follow: first, all stratified and unequal social relations are arbitrary and unjustified; and second, that it is not possible for the part of those who have no part to remain absolutely uncounted.) If we are willing to follow this account of politics this far, then a significant problem emerges: since Rancière maintains that politics is heterogeneous from policing, this heterogeneity entails, as he admits, that such transformative events are rare.

As I understand Rancière, his concession that politics is rare does not preclude the possibility of micropolitical struggle against or resistance to a given regime of policing. Therefore I have prefaced this review of *Friendship in an Age of Economics* with these remarks because May’s discussion of the politics of friendship provides an account of micropolitical resistance unforeseen by Rancière. Although Rancière considers aesthetics as a form of micropolitics, he does not claim that it is the only possible form of micropolitics. And while May does not explicitly situate *Friendship in an Age of Economics* through Rancière’s work until Chapter 7, his account emphasizes how friendship, especially what he calls deep friendship, is a relationship between equals. (It should also be noted, given May’s anarchism, that his argument could be formulated as a claim that friendship is a rudimentary form of free association.) Broadly speaking, friendship is egalitarian insofar as it is a practice available to anyone and everyone, and this “common

aspect of human life” that is friendship requires some of the same activities and concerns that shape a broader sense of social solidarity (59). More specifically, though, May argues that deep friendship “cut[s] against the grain of neoliberalism”—that is, at a micropolitical level it resists or interrupts the practices and discourses that govern neoliberal regimes of policing—because it involves a shared concern for the other, common passions and activities, mutual trust (70).

May argues that neoliberalism is pervasive enough to affect everyday social relationships such as friendship; it is one of the “dominant motifs” the contemporary world, “an emerging and intersecting set of practices, embedded in a particular economic orientation, that has contributed much into making us who we are today” (3-4). Indeed, he contends that just as deep friendship cuts against the grain of neoliberalism, so does neoliberalism affect negatively friendship. At this point we should focus on the target of May’s critique of neoliberalism. Numerous critics, including David Harvey (who published *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* in 2005) and Naomi Klein (author of *The Shock Doctrine*, 2007) have detailed “the deleterious effects of neoliberalism on the majority upon whom it was imposed” (8; May’s referring to Klein but the point holds for Harvey, too). Their works present a damning critique of how the implementation of neoliberalism across the globe—including, as Harvey notes, the implementation of monetarism, the financialization of economies, privatization and deregulation, shifting the tax burden from the rich to the general populace, and the use and police enforcement of austerity measures to break down the power of social solidarity and union organization—results in a massive transfer of wealth from the general populace to the elite as well as a massive transfer of wealth from the global south to the global north. Both have documented how what often reads like a technocratic or administrative discourse about economic practices is also part of a political project.

While he acknowledges these aspects of neoliberalism (and at points critiques Harvey’s analysis thereof), May’s critique focuses on how the pervasiveness of neoliberalism affects our sense of social agency. In short, he argues that the lives that neoliberal discourse encourages us to lead—lives as consumers and entrepreneurs—undermine social relationships that encourage deep friendships and

social solidarity. The consumer and the entrepreneur are, according to May, the two prominent figures of neoliberalism. He adopts the term *figure* from the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, where Foucault analyzes four figures of sexuality from the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult. Though Foucault does not define the term, May proposes that a figure is a target and an object of a set of practices and discourses “impinging upon individuals” (18). These practices “impinge” on individuals as a form of constraint, but these figures can also produce forms of individuality with which we identify, and May is interested in how identifying oneself as a consumer or as an entrepreneur works against maintaining or valorizing those practices that form deep friendships. While Foucault’s discussion of the four figures of sexuality analyzed them as part of a disciplinary project of normalization, May argues that the figures of neoliberalism are not normalizing as much as they are (limited) forms of individualization. But I think it is important here to emphasize—more than May does—that the moral or practical discourse of neoliberalism is normalizing, too; it gives an account of what we ought to do, and how we ought to act, and that success and failure are the product of individual choices exclusive of social forces or constraints. Thus, while neoliberal figures are not situated within a broader network of institutional socio-normalization, and while they may be arguably less “intrusive” than those disciplinary practices, they remain normalizing and coercive (May gestures in this direction when he notes that neoliberalism continues to intervene and target particular populations through incarceration).

Practices of friendship and neoliberalism intersect when individuals come to identify themselves as consumers or entrepreneurs. The consumer, as May defines it, is oriented around three practices: consumption of commodities or entertainment, living in the present, and an individualism concerned with individualization through branding (32-37). The entrepreneur—the figure of *homo oeconomicus*—views “human beings [and relationships with others] in terms of capital investment and return” (45). Therefore the entrepreneur establishes an order of preferences among social relationships according to perceived future returns, and assumes, in a thoroughgoing individualism, that the motives of others function according to the same type of calculations. Identifying with either—

or both—of these figures need not be total; instead, May maintains that our identities are non-exhaustive and revisable. One can be, for instance, a friend, a lover, and an entrepreneur, but May argues that an identification as entrepreneur becomes deleterious when it comes to shape and constrain other relationships. We come to identify with these figures when we adopt and prioritize the motivations and activities of consumers and entrepreneurs (at this point it is important to add that identification need not be explicitly recognized—as Sartre would say individuals are shaped by seriality before they recognize this process as such). Thus when May claims that consumers seek, in Aristotelian terms, friendships of pleasure and entrepreneurs friendships of usefulness, he is not arguing that we ought not pursue these types of friendship at all. They have a place in our lives. But he contends that “the context constructed by neoliberalism does not simply promote friendships like these *alongside* close [or deep] friendships; it promotes them *instead of* such friendships” (140). There is little room, in the priorities of the consumer or the entrepreneur, for the bonds necessary for deep or close friendships. The consumer, then, values friendship according to present gratification, while the entrepreneur views friendships as investments that are prioritized according to their future returns. In a sense, these friendships are beneficial for the individual, but they do not maintain a strong concern for the other for the other’s sake.

Again, May does not claim that friendships of pleasure or usefulness are necessarily pernicious. He is, however, concerned that maintaining friendships on the basis of perceived benefits corrodes the bonds and practices that shape deep friendships. These—deep friendships—involve bonds that are also necessary for broader forms of social solidarity but also

allow for reflection on evaluative outlooks, and because they offer safe havens for self-invention, open up a space for reflection on the values of given social, political, and economic arrangements. And because they do so, they are capable of supporting challenges to these arrangements” (128).

Insofar as they provide the opportunity for self-reflection and—invention, deep friendships are meaningful in a way that those of

pleasure or usefulness are not. Moreover, while consumers are oriented by the present and entrepreneurs the future, deep friendships evolve around shared passions and activities. The shared past of these activities provides a sense of long-term meaningfulness that shapes not only who we were, but who we have become. On account of this shared meaningfulness, deep friendships offer the space for friends to challenge themselves and the pervasiveness of social norms. It is with a close friend that I might voice dissatisfaction with the status quo and my place within it, and begin to formulate a challenge to it. This challenge, May contends, is itself political, not because friendship presents a particular political program, but because it activates practices of mutual trust and concern for the other. While neoliberalism encourages us to see others “as resources or competitors or objects of entertainment,” deep friendships provide an intimate experience of the relationships of trust and equality “in a way that can be translated to movements of solidarity and against the encroachments of neoliberalism” (133; 131). In sum, May argues that we need not wait for broad political movements to challenge neoliberalism, that resistance and transformative practices can begin a common and almost everyday form of social relationship. For this reason, *Friendship in an Age of Economics* is itself an important intervention concerning “how we might live in the contemporary world with its particular power arrangements” (103)—and how we might change it.

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1 May, Todd. *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press), 57.