



## Friendship and counter-conduct in the neoliberal regime of truth

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### review of

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### Introduction and context

Today we live in an era of social and economic crises. As neoliberalism has established itself as a hegemonic regime, the dark side of neoliberalism has come into sharp relief. Empirical data show that in all examples of implementing neoliberal policies, we can observe that it is only a small minority who benefits, while the majority is worse off (Harvey, 2005). Defenders and proponents of neoliberal thought believe that the solution to problems in the social world is to be found in 'enterprising up' (du Gay, 2004) individuals, public and private organizations, and countries. They should be made 'fit for the market' by increasing competitiveness and flexibility, instilling economic orientation, cutting benefits and welfare, selectively investing in 'human capital', etc. There seems to be no alternative. On the other hand, paradoxically, many of those who argue heatedly against neoliberalism as an evil system actively participate in its practices and follow the rules of the game. Academia is no exception. There is a whole 'regime of truth' that is made up of individualising rankings, ratings, success points, procedures, and performance measurements, and it works every day to convince us that there is no alternative. After all, how else could one be

recognised as a 'valuable human resource' within our 'enterprised-up' universities (Willmott, 1995)?

Todd May, a philosopher from Clemson University (USA) who has written extensively on continental (poststructuralist) philosophy, in particular on the philosophy of Michel Foucault (May, 2006), Gilles Deleuze (May, 2005), and, more recently, on Jacques Rancière (May, 2010), rejects such deterministic thinking. Influenced by Foucault, he insists on the contingency of history (May, 2006) and on the constitutive role of *practices* in forming and defining 'who we are' (May, 2001).

In his new book, May is particularly concerned with how neoliberalism as an 'emerging and intersecting set of practices embedded in a particular economic orientation' (4) influences and shapes us. In a broad sense, the book is about how our relations to ourselves and to others are organized in the current (neoliberal) regime of truth and how they can be organized differently. May deals with the question of how *certain forms* of friendship can provide an alternative to the neoliberal structuring of social relations, and in a more active and political sense, can provide the foundations for resistance to practices and institutions of neoliberalism.

## Structure and content

Neoliberalism has arisen as a specific regime in which it is argued that the function of the state is to ensure the competitiveness of states, organizations, and individuals. In contrast to classical liberalism, neoliberalism does not simply trust in the natural emergence of the market. Instead, it requires state intervention in order to provide and *create* the conditions for markets. Neoliberalism is much more than simply the name for a specific economic policy. It is a programme for transforming society as a whole by changing the orientations and ethics of the actors. It does this by altering 'rules of the game' (Foucault, 2008: 260) and the environment in which they operate. It is in particular the economists of the Chicago School who have provided the basis for such a far-reaching programme, firstly by interpreting and analysing human behaviour in general – from child-rearing to learning and education, etc. – as economic behaviour, and secondly by informing policies and interventions that shape the world according to this image.

The second chapter introduces the theoretical concept of the *figure*, which is derived from Foucault's work. Figures are normative constructions that imply specific modes of being. They differ from Weberian 'ideal types' in that they

emerge from within a specific historical field of practices and are not created by someone analysing these practices from outside. In contrast to ideal types, figures are normative. They categorise and judge empirically. Foucault (1981: 105) himself briefly introduces the term in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, where he discusses the perverse adult, the Malthusian couple, the masturbating child, and the hysterical woman as ‘figures’ associated with the ‘dispositive of sexuality’. Crucially, the figures that Foucault discusses there are linked to the larger project of *normalisation*, providing the basis for interventions to bring individuals back to the norm.

May discusses the ‘consumer’ and the ‘entrepreneur’ as two dominant ‘figures’ of neoliberalism which are distinct from the project of (disciplinary) normalisation. They are linked to the dynamic dictates of the market – what Bröckling (2007) called the ‘comparative imperative of the market’ – rather than to a posited norm. The central issue for individuals is no longer whether they are ‘normal’ but rather whether they participate in the market; whether they are ‘in’ or ‘out’ (30). To be clear, neither the existence of entrepreneurial activity nor the act of buying or consuming of things is new or particularly ‘neoliberal’. People have bought and consumed things right from the beginning of trade economies. What is new is the dominance and sedimentation of these activities into *figures* that imply and promote specific relations to self and others. According to May the figure of the consumer embodies several themes: People identify less with what they produce and more with what they consume. The specific time orientation is ‘pointillist’ (38). The consumer is not concerned with the past or future but with what is happening at moment. An orientation towards immediate enjoyment and pleasure is coupled with a discouragement of reflection on the effects of one’s current activity on others.

In contrast to the consumer, the figure of the entrepreneur has a broader theoretical history that lies at the heart of the neoliberal economic theory of the Chicago School. It is particularly associated with the thought of Theodore Schultz and the Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker. According to them, we need to recognise the ‘capital’ embodied in human beings and think of them and the social relations in terms of capital investment and return. Especially in the work of Gary Becker, the entrepreneur emerges as a new version of the ‘*homo oeconomicus*’, as a ‘correlate of a governmentality which will act on the environment and systematically modify its variables’ (Foucault, 2008: 271). He is no longer a partner in exchange, but an ‘entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital’ (*ibid.*: 226). For these thinkers, not only economic relations in the narrow sense but the entirety of human behaviour can – and should – be understood in terms capital and investment. In contrast to the consumer, the entrepreneur does not passively await entertainment in the

present, but actively seeks opportunities and is oriented towards the *future*. S/he expects a return on investment. What unites both figures is the highly individualistic orientations that they imply.

The next chapter is more philosophical in orientation and opens up a space for thinking beyond these individualising figures by discussing ‘varieties of friendship’. May, like many others (see for example French, 2007), develops the notion of friendship starting with Aristotle’s (2002) distinctions in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Books 8 and 9) where he distinguishes between ‘friendships of pleasure’, ‘friendships of utility’, and ‘true friendships’. It is easy to see how these notions of friendship relate to the figures of the ‘consumer’ and the ‘entrepreneur’. May argues that the figures of neoliberalism enable and strongly encourage the first two types of friendship. They allow friendship for the sake of gaining pleasurable experiences or for the sake of usefulness. What is discouraged is friendship for its own sake and those aspects of friendship that go beyond economic orientations. While May retains Aristotle’s central idea that there are relations concerned with the other for the sake of the other, he differs from Aristotle in that he does not limit such friendship to particularly ‘virtuous’ people.

May’s central concern is not with ‘true’ or ‘pure’ friendships, but with what he calls ‘deep’ or ‘close’ friendships. He characterises them by four traits: they are ‘*other-regarding*’ (they seek the good of the other for the sake of the other); they involve *passion or affection* for the other as a central characteristic, not just as a supplement; and they are *historical* in character, since the shared past plays a central role. Linked to this is the irreplaceability of close friendships and relationships of trust which they entail. The fourth characteristic is the *meaning* that these relationships provide to the lives of friends.

The most interesting and challenging questions emerge in chapters VI and VII, where May discusses (close) friendships first as an alternative to (and within) neoliberalism and then as a potential space that allows the grounding and formation of active forms of resistance to neoliberalism. The first question hinges on the economic or non-economic character of friendship. Can we say that (close) friendships are non-economic relations? Can we say that they are essentially different from the forms of relations that neoliberalism encourages? May’s answer to these questions is: yes. Relations of (close) friendship, he argues, are *non-economic* in character and closer to gift-giving than to any other form of economy. They ‘*largely*’ – an important qualifier – ignore accounting and the calculating of gains and losses, and thinking in terms of investment and return is foreign to them.

There are, of course objections to this view. Most prominently, Derrida (1992) argued that as soon as the gift appears as a gift either to the donor or the donee, a circle of economic exchange is established. Seen in this way, relations of friendship cannot provide an alternative to neoliberal structuring of relations; rather, they are themselves caught up in the economy of investment and return. While Derrida's positioning of the gift as the 'figure of the impossible' (7) reminds us that not all practices have a rationality and an expectation of return and opens a way of thinking outside the economic circle (Jones and Spicer, 2006: 195-7) it casts doubt on the potential to escape the economic circle that May attributes to close friendships.

May disagrees, saying that Derrida's view is itself guilty of neglecting the specific context of friendship in which the gift emerges. In close friendships, he argues, 'the emergence of a balance sheet into reflexive awareness... is not the indicator of an ongoing underlying economic quality to the friendship, but instead of a problem or at least a perceived problem with its current state' (112). In May's view, Derrida's discussion of the inescapable economic character of the gift exchange is itself an historically situated view that needs to be questioned. It can certainly not be said that Derrida embraces the neoliberal structuring of social relations (see e.g. Derrida, 1994, particularly p. 81-85 on the 'plagues of the new world order' (81)), and May does not say that. Instead, May's argument is that by neglecting the specific historical and social context of gift-giving in relations of (close) friendship, Derrida overlooks an important alternative to the neoliberal structuring of social relations and thus indirectly plays into the hands of neoliberalism.

So what grounds the non-economic character of (close) friendships? For May it is *trust*, the mutual dependency of close friends, the sharing of experiences, and the developing of bonds rooted in past experiences or shared in the present. Within such contexts, gift-giving emerges without much awareness that it is happening. In friendship, trust is not a calculation that the friend will act in specific, predictable ways; it is in May's view a 'placing oneself in the hands of the friend' (114). In May's view, it is the absorption in what is happening that precludes accounting. It is only when the flow of friendship and the immersion in mutual becoming (Webb, 2003) is interrupted that the calculating logic emerges within relations of friendship. May provides an interesting analogy: If we watch a movie that engages us, the fact that it lasts 90 minutes or so does not really matter. It is irrelevant to our experience. It is only when the movie does *not* engage us that we begin to count the minutes, and it is then that we might reflect – like the entrepreneur – on whether the time we have 'invested' is worth the return on investment.

Extending the analogy, one might say that watching a good movie is not simply or not only consuming images for immediate pleasure. It might include being challenged and questioned, thus opening one's evaluative outlooks. This of course is not necessarily a comfortable experience. Similarly, the 'critical friend' intervenes and might challenge our views of ourselves and the world (see also Foucault, 2001). Such interventions require an abandoning of calculation; the 'critical friend' makes him/herself vulnerable and dependent. S/he must *trust* in the bonds of friendship rather than calculate the effects of the intervention. Close friendships are *in this sense* an alternative to the individualising and calculating logic/rationality of neoliberalism that does not lie outside or beyond the boundaries of its influence. Rather, they provide an alternative in which the pervasive logic of neoliberalism is questioned or even evaded. Friendships 'provide a space where an alternative to consumerism and investment can be nourished. [... T]o be immersed in a deep friendship is already to refuse to be overtaken by the values fostered in a neoliberal society' (121).

Is friendship more than organising private relations? How is friendship related to politics? Can it provide the basis for a 'progressive politics of solidarity' (124) that resists the individualising logic of neoliberalism? Can it be considered as a model for political organizing? These are the questions that May discusses in chapter VII. On the one hand, it can be argued that friendship tends to close itself off from wider social relations. Given the particular character of friendships, they might be seen as turning away from political involvement and ignoring the wider concerns of society. It can be argued that friendship is detrimental to political engagement, and in this respect, there is a deep ambivalence to it. In *The politics of friendship*, Derrida (1997) has argued that the (classical) models of friendship reproduce the friend/enemy distinction. For Derrida, a 'democracy-to-come' relies on the *deconstruction* of this dualism. In keeping with this view, an active resistance to the dominant form of structuring social relations cannot be built on the model of friendship (and associated models like 'community'), since friendship is based on the exclusion of the other. Derrida's concern is with opening of closed and closing models of organising social relations and creating a space for increasing responsibility to and recognition of the other. From this perspective, what allows solidarity to emerge is not the cultivation of friendship, but the deconstruction of the borders between the same (of friendship) and the other (of enmity).

An alternative perspective emerges from the work of Jacques Rancière, which is more directly addressed to those 'outside' the dominant regime – to that 'part that has no part' (Rancière, 1999: 8-9) in the direction of society. For Rancière, democratic politics relies on the questioning of institutionalised distinctions and classifications and on the possibility of articulating alternatives by those who

'have no part'; it relies on equality and collective trust. May accepts the fundamental ambivalence in friendship. His position, however, is closer to that of Rancière than of Derrida. He argues that *certain aspects* of friendship are fundamental for the development of alternative modes of organising social relations that can actively challenge the politics of neoliberalism because they can provide both the themes and the training and motivation for movements of political resistance. Close friendships provide safe spaces for self-invention; they open up spaces for reflecting on one's evaluative outlooks on social, political and economic arrangements (128). In sum, May suggests that 'friendship, because it is a relationship among equals, one defined by mutual trust, embodies equality in a way that can be translated to movements of solidarity and against encroachments of neoliberalism' (131).

### Evaluation and conclusion

May not only writes *about* friendship; his book is itself a fine example of 'writing *in* friendship' (Townley, 1994). He critically engages in various literatures without being judgemental. He is more interested in how these various literatures might help us to think differently about how life is organised. May's book does not provide alternatives in a prescriptive tone; instead, it opens a space for reflecting on how we relate to self and others and how such relating might be transformed. It avoids both conspiracy theory and the anthropomorphising of neoliberalism: there is no single person or institution called 'neoliberalism'. Rather, neoliberalism is *a set of practices* that is structured by an economic rationality that invades and (increasingly) pervades all spheres of life. To resist neoliberalism is not simply to point to a 'system out there'; it is, first of all, recognising how this pervasive logic (trans)forms us, and how, by participating in its specific practices, we more or less *become* what neoliberal theory takes as given: calculating subjects.

May's book complements studies of neoliberal governmentality and the emergence of the 'enterprising self' (e.g. Bröckling, 2007; du Gay, 2004; Rose, 1998). These studies focussed on the analysis of programmes and examined in detail the technologies and practices of (neoliberal) self-formation. Many of them (while frequently criticised for being 'deterministic') end on the note that 'government is a congenitally failing operation' (Miller and Rose, 1990: 10). Similarly, May stresses that while figures (of neoliberalism) may be pervasive, they are not exhaustive and cannot determine or ultimately enforce its norms. Going one step beyond studies of governmentality, May's book provides a way to consider alternative modes of organising social relations that can be broadly subsumed under the category of 'counter-conduct' (Davidson, 2011). Friendship

is not transformed into a programme that can be followed and executed; it is presented as a mode of being that can be experienced and with which one can experiment. It is not an (abstract) utopia but a concrete possibility. As such, it will always be a precarious space of possibility – always in danger of being captured by the pervasive logic of practices in which we are embedded – but also a space that can be folded in various ways into social practices for creating alternative modes of being – modes of being that move us beyond the narrow, calculating logic that is often (mis)taken as the whole reality (Stivale, 2008). It is only to the degree that this experience is forgotten and devalued that neoliberalism succeeds. As May says, '[i]nasmuch as we think of ourselves as consumers and entrepreneurs, and act in accordance with these self-conceptions, we are unlikely to open ourselves to close friendships. They will not appear to us as possibilities on our interpersonal horizon' (141).

In his analysis of the figures of neoliberalism, May draws heavily on Foucault's (2008) lectures on biopolitics and on Foucault's reading of the economists of the Chicago School. In his own trajectory, Foucault turned to Greek antiquity to reveal alternative modes of structuring relations to self and others. He was particularly attracted to the practice of Parrhesia (truth-telling) as a practice that both challenges the dominant regime of truth and provides an alternative mode of self-formation (Luxon, 2008). Particularly in the Socratic tradition, the friendship relation was at the heart of the 'parrhesiastic game', as a necessary component for helping the other to get rid of his/her self-delusion (see Foucault, 2001: 133-42). Foucault's (1997a) brief remarks on 'friendship as a way of life' indicate one line of developing an ethics and politics of 'counter-conduct' that potentially changes force relations between individuals and modifies one's relations to oneself (Davidson, 2011). In developing this line and linking it to our presence, May contributes to the development of an ethico-politics that both resists the individualising power neoliberalism and encourages us 'to fight against the impoverishment of the relational fabric' (Foucault, 1997b: 158) of the social – including the organisational – world we inhabit.

Grey and Sturdy (2007: 169) have noticed that '(o)rganizational analysis has been shy of speaking about friendship, and where it has done so at all, it has adopted a language of social capital, network ties, and similar terms'. To speak about friendship (solely) in these terms is already to be incorporated into neoliberal newspeak that forecloses the possibility of thinking differently about how relations are organized. On the other hand, there are also good reasons for being sceptical when the language of friendship is evoked in the context of work organizations and embraced and appropriated by culture management programmes. If (discursively) 'we are all friends here' (Costas, 2012), normative pressures and forms of normative control are created that strengthen rather than

undermine the neoliberal logic and conceal rather than transform the relations of power that support it.

May's book provides an alternative language in which organisational analysts could explore 'friendship' both as an 'organizing principle' (Grey and Sturdy, 2007: 164) – that is in tension, but not necessarily incompatible with work-organizations – and as an 'organizing element' that is 'enmeshed within and sometimes cuts across (formal) structures' (165). As such, it (potentially) creates a space of 'counter-conduct' or solidarity that resists individualising pressures but may also be productive of exclusions. It is this darker side of even 'close friendships' that May recognises but somehow downplays in his work. Vice versa, empirical studies of 'enterprising selves' may also shed light on how the discourse of enterprise may also be productive of 'transgressive desires' (Fenwick, 2002) that value mutually supportive relations over individualising competition. That said, May's book might also provide a starting point for exploring alternative organizations (such as solidarity movements, etc.) and their modes of structuring relations. A genealogy of such modes of organising coupled with an experimental attitude might open up a space for reinventing ourselves and the ways we organise our relations. May's book is an example of thought that recognises the historically contingent limitations and encourages us to move beyond them. It reminds us that there *are* alternatives; not one, but many. Friendship in its non-economic mode is one of them. Whether this is strong enough to breed and nourish solidarity movements that can effectively resist the individualising pressure of neoliberalism and its practices is a still-unanswered question.

Even though there are good reasons for being pessimistic about the possibilities of change in such a pervasive system, there are also reasons to be optimistic in Foucault's sense. This is an optimism that does not 'consist in saying that things couldn't be better [but rather]... in saying that so many things can be changed, fragile as they are, bound up more with circumstances than with necessities, more arbitrary than self-evident, more a matter of complex, but temporary, historical circumstances than with inevitable anthropological constraints' (Foucault, 1990: 156). It is in this sense that May's book provides an optimistic perspective. This optimism is not to be confused with an idealization or romanticizing of 'friendship'; instead it consists of remembering alternatives to a 'regime of truth' that denies the very possibility of conducting our lives – both inside and outside of organizations – differently.

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