

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Blatterer, Harry. *Everyday Friendships: Intimacy as Freedom in a Complex World.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 219 pp., \$105.00 (9780230272521)

Harry Blatterer's *Everyday Friendships* makes a significant and original contribution to the scholarship on personal and intimate life. The book argues for renewed attention by sociologists to friendship, and to one of its forms in particular: friendship as an intimate and dyadic relation between two individuals. The study of friendship remains marginal in sociology, especially in comparison to familial, romantic, or erotic relations. Moreover, as Blatterer argues, those studies that do address friendship typically do not address its dyadic, intimate forms, but instead subsume friendships under broader rubrics such as networks, communities, or civil society. The problem with these approaches, according to Blatterer, is that friendship becomes a kind of "sinkhole" concept, a catchall term for a jumble of voluntary social bonds, ranging from close and intimate long-term bonds to the weak ties of acquaintances and instrumental contacts (6, 56). By contrast, Blatterer aims to develop a more analytically precise concept of friendship, one that distinguishes "the weak ties of friendly relations" from "the strong ties of friendship" (56). His approach is to treat friendship as an intimate relation, and to study it in relation to the historical development of the intimate sphere in Western modernity. Friendship, for Blatterer, is a bond based on trust, respect, and justice, and it is sustained by care, support and affection (5, 62). It is thus shaped by and instantiates—however unevenly or imperfectly—various normative ideals of modern intimacy. Most important among these ideals, for Blatterer, is freedom, which he understands as the ability to be oneself in the company of another, and to shape the terms of one's relationships relatively free from cultural prescription (6, 27).

The source of friendship's relational freedom lies in what Blatterer calls its "institutional deficit" (65). While friendship is certainly a social relationship in the Weberian sense of a meaningful way of orienting to others, it is nonetheless not a full-fledged social institu-

tion. First, friendship lacks the “institutional connectivity” of other personal bonds, as it is relatively unanchored in social institutions such as the law, the market, or the modern therapeutic and self-help industries, all of which would have the power to reify it or impose external and instrumental logics. And second, friendship has only a weak “normative infrastructure”. While friendship is shaped by typifications and cultural meanings such as those that define normative ideals of intimacy, those meanings are nonetheless quite general. They are not binding regulative norms that can elicit and prescribe specific attitudes and practices, but instead are “meaning-constitutive frames of reference” that give a sense to friendship practices but leave them relatively open (86). In Robert Paine’s terms, friendship is thus a sort of “institutionalized non-institution” (88). The consequence of friendship’s unusual institutional status is that friends have a great deal of freedom to choose when and how to make friendships, and to “create the relationship according to their own vision” (65). All this stands in contrast to romantic and erotic love, and Blatterer devotes a chapter to drawing a contrast between the different “institutional trajectories” of friendship and romantic love. While friendship lacks institutional connectivity, by contrast romantic love has clear ties to law and religion through marriage, to capitalist markets through the commodification of romance, and to professional forms of expertise through self-help and therapeutic practices. The relational freedom of friendship lies in the way it falls outside the ambit of those institutions with the power to regulate and reify it.

Friendship’s freedom remains, however, an embedded freedom. One important exception where friendship remains clearly anchored in modern institutions is its connection to heterosexuality and the heterosexual gender order, which manifests, for example, in the cultural barriers to cross-sex friendships. Gender is a central theme of the book, and Blatterer devotes two of the book’s six chapters to the questions of gender and sexuality. Throughout most of the book Blatterer stresses the “generativity” of friendship: that is, the way friendship, as a non-institutionalized bond based on trust and affection, opens an interactional space for experimentation, for self-development and self-transformation, and for the possible subversion or suspension of cultural norms, conventions, and social expectations (119, 172). Blatterer is interested in gender, however, because it shows the limits to that openness, and thus the limits of the freedom of friendship. Those who develop unconventional friendships—such as erotic friendships, cross-sex friendships, intersectional friendships, or affectionate and

intimate male friendships— will have to contend with a troublesome taken-for-granted heteronormative gender order and its associated beliefs and practices around issues such as erotic attraction, love and romance, and gendered patterns of intimacy. That such issues necessarily produce barriers to friendship shows that friendship's freedom is limited. Intimate dyadic friendships, in other words, still refract broader cultural norms and institutionalized inequalities.

As with any book with a contribution to make, readers of *Everyday Friendships* will find points worth debating. Any sociological approach to friendship must deal with the tension between the semantic drift of friendship—the way the term friend is used in everyday speech for an increasingly broad range of relationships—and the researcher's need for analytical precision. Blatterer's approach is to theorize friendship under the rubric of intimacy, and in doing so he has stressed the need for a precise and restricted way of conceptualizing friendship in the social sciences. In emphasizing such a restricted notion of friendship, Blatterer has taken a position at odds with much of the sociological scholarship on friendship. Most researchers on friendship take their cues from the way their research participants talk about friendship, and so they generally offer a rather broad analytical concept of friendship. Blatterer's emphasis on intimacy and friendship is important, since, as he puts it, it helps us separate friendship from friendly relations more generally. Still, it is difficult not to read Blatterer's book as focused on one form of friendship in particular, even while it is a particularly significant form. Perhaps it is possible to take Blatterer's point seriously about avoiding the conflation of friendship and friendly relations, but to still make careful and precise analytical distinctions between friendship's various forms. The great variety of possibilities for thinking about and doing friendships emerge from the very freedom and openness of friendship that Blatterer discusses.

Blatterer's book will appeal to scholars with an interest in intimacy and personal relationships, as well as those who have a more general interest in critical theory and its themes of freedom, recognition, rationalization, and authenticity. Blatterer makes a convincing case that friendship is an important site for the study of intimacy beyond its familial, romantic, and erotic forms. The book should, therefore, be considered as one contribution to the new scholarship on intimacy and personal life that moves beyond sociology's longstanding focus on heterosexual couples and their children. Blatterer shows why friendships matter in people's lives, and in so doing, he

shows why friendship should be of interest not just for those working in the subfields of intimate relations, but for the discipline of sociology more broadly.

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