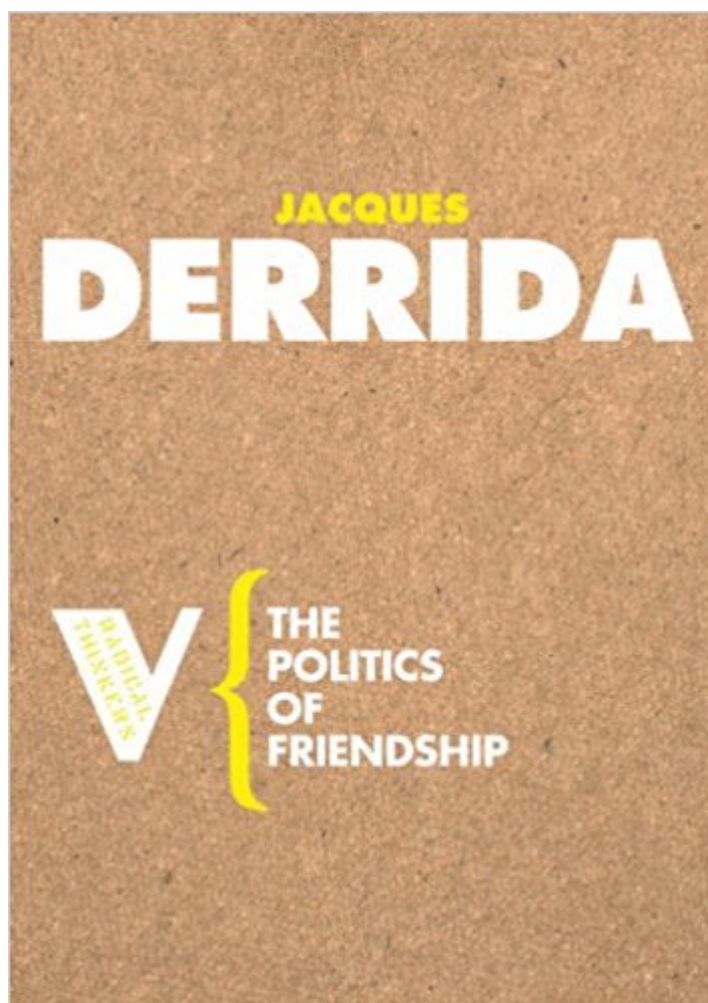


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The Politics Of Friendship (Radical Thinkers)



Synopsis

“O, my friends, there is no friend.” The most influential of contemporary philosophers explores the idea of friendship and its political consequences, past and future. Until relatively recently, Jacques Derrida was seen by many as nothing more than the high priest of Deconstruction, by turns stimulating and fascinating, yet always somewhat disengaged from the central political questions of our time. Or so it seemed. Derrida’s “political turn,” marked especially by the appearance of *Specters of Marx*, has surprised some and delighted others. In *The Politics of Friendship* Derrida renews and enriches this orientation through an examination of the political history of the idea of friendship pursued down the ages. Derrida’s thoughts are haunted throughout the book by the strange and provocative address attributed to Aristotle, “my friends, there is no friend” and its inversions by later philosophers such as Montaigne, Kant, Nietzsche, Schmitt and Blanchot. The exploration allows Derrida to recall and restage the ways in which all the oppositional couples of Western philosophy and political thought—friendship and enmity, private and public life—have become madly and dangerously unstable. At the same time he dissects genealogy itself, the familiar and male-centered notion of fraternity and the virile virtue whose authority has gone unquestioned in our culture of friendship and our models of democracy. The future of the political, for Derrida, becomes the future of friends, the invention of a radically new friendship, of a deeper and more inclusive democracy. This remarkable book, his most profoundly important for many years, offers a challenging and inspiring vision of that future.

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Customer Reviews

Following the death of Paul DeMan and the controversies surrounding the ensuing revelations of his personal life and wartime politics, Derrida delivered a lengthy seminar on the ethics and emotions of friendship. Each session began with the same plaintive refrain from Montaigne's essay on friendship: "O my friends, there is no friend." Audiences found the sessions moving despite being abstruse and belabored at times. Throughout Derrida's erudite contextualizing of politics and loyalty from Aristotle to Blanchot, there were strains of personal loss compounded by a Proustian sense of presumed historical fact undermined by verified events. Previous versions of this work by different translators have been available in the *Journal of Philosophy* (v. 85, 1988) and *American Imago* (v. 50, 1993). Perhaps because no personal presence intervenes here, this translation sounds inept, trivializing the occasion.

Marilyn Gaddis Rose, SUNY at Binghamton
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“Derrida has never written more illuminatingly on Aristotle, Nietzsche and Heidegger than he does here.”

•Choice

If you can get beyond the often riveting nature of Derrida's style of writing, this text provides a profound insight into the relationship of thought and community. For readers unfamiliar with Derrida's concepts like deconstruction, this text offers a unique approach to his overall philosophy.

Great!

Love Derrida's thought processes. He thinks like no other man. His thoughts on friendship and the deconstruction were excellent. Gave me thought and value.

This purchase arrived in a timely manner."Even in an empty forest a master finds joy, because he wants nothing."

I am studying Jean-Luc Nancy(N), Derrida's good friend and colleague. D published a volume about N, ON TOUCHING, in which he critiques N for employing the term "fraternity" positively to indicate an acceptable context for human

association. N has responded that he has made it clear in many publications that he is sensitive to the issues that D finds inescapable with the use of *fraternity*. As Ian James writes in THE NANCY DICTIONARY, *Fraternity is a relation in which the incommensurable singular plurality of being is affirmed as an infinite sharing*. Somewhere in reference to that disagreement, I was directed to read this volume by D on friendship. The book is a formal and scholarly investigation of the classical *“canon,”* as D calls it, on the topic of friendship (Aristotle, Cicero, Kant, Montaigne, Nietzsche, etc. up to Bataille, Blanchot, and Levinas). Since that scholarly investigation is not my interest, after reading the opening chapters, I switched to reading only the footnotes for each chapter, many of which are quite extensive. When I finally arrived at the final two chapters of the book, I began to read again. There I found what I had been looking for. D offers a compelling argument that the word *fraternity* has always had masculine overtones in our tradition, which today amount to ridiculous denigrations of the feminine; D calls it *“the virility of virtue.”* Alongside that he reveals, through a scholarly deconstruction of Kant’s *METAPHYSICS OF MORALS*, an example of the contradiction that lingers at the heart of ethics: the requirement of distance for the proper maintenance of friendship is not applied to love, even while no account is given of a distinction between the two to permit such discontinuity. D asks, *“Why would the infinite distance which opens respect up, and which Kant wished to limit by love, not open love up as well?”* Love then becomes the problem and not the answer crooned in popular, as well as scholarly, texts. The element of discontinuity persists even to the time of the writing of this book by D, who does not presume to supply an answer. All of which echoes with great emphasis Simon Critchley’s complaint in *INFINITELY DEMANDING* that we have no adequate political philosophy today. In summary of this work by D, one might say, *“It is little wonder that it is so.”* All our categories for understanding and imagining a basis for loving human relationships, or even for democracy, are tattered and torn. D is left only the option of a question to end the study: *“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? O my democratic friends ..”*

This book has its origins in the seminar that Jacques Derrida gave during the academic year 1988-89, as part of his late attempt to grapple with issues of political philosophy that he also deals

with in his *Specters of Marx*. The book itself is an extended replay of the first session of the seminar, in which the French philosopher (who died in 2004) gave an overview of the themes that he would cover at more length during the year, beginning with the apostrophe: "O my friends, there are no friends" that Montaigne attributes to Aristotle. I was fortunate enough to attend that lecture and some of those that followed. The desire to retrieve that experience from the past and to compare the understanding of the written text with the impression left by the oral intervention certainly drove me to read this volume, with the English language providing an additional distance that I somehow find necessary to break with the immediacy of my native French. The stage was set twenty years ago at the salle Dussane of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, before an audience composed of fellow academics, faithful followers and curious onlookers, drawn together by the intellectual aura of the French philosopher who was at the peak of his public career. The atmosphere was quite different from the scenes of mass hysteria that are said to have accompanied the seminar of Jacques Lacan in that very same conference room some twenty years before, with swooning ladies fainting over the words of the Maître and fanatical psychoanalysts arguing furiously over Freud's legacy. The cosmopolitan nature of the audience, composed mainly of foreigners, bore witness to the international following that Derrida's brand of philosophy already attracted, as well as to the conservatism of French philosophy students, who tended to shun this lecture in favor of more academically correct seminars. Reading Derrida or other French authors like Bataille, Foucault, Barthes or Bourdieu is sometimes considered as a kind of rite of passage into the world of rebellious intellect. Such motivation was not absent from my decision to attend that seminar, which had no connexion whatsoever with my university major in economics. But if I or others were in for the show, for a kind of post-modern happening, then the lecture was certainly a deception. As a philosopher molded in the classical tradition, deeply familiar with the canon of great authors that he quoted in their original language (be it Greek, Latin, German or English), Derrida expected the same kind of familiarity, and the same language skills, from his listeners. I remember my sense of frustration and awe as I realized that my philosophical background, limited to a course in classical philosophy during high school and preparatory class as well as personal readings of contemporary French authors, hadn't prepared me at all to dealing with the many quotes, allusive references and close readings of topical excerpts that were thrown at us during that first session. I came home with a long reading list of quoted authors, some of whom I later skipped entirely like Aristotle, others which I discovered during that academic year and with whom I am still familiar, like Carl Schmitt. Friendship has been celebrated by many classical authors, starting with Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, very often as an act of mourning over the disappearance of a beloved one or as a celebration of a great couple

of friends, always men, who provide the model of ideal friendship: Orestes and Pylades, Theseus and Pirithous, Damon and Pythias, Laelius and Scipio, Montaigne and La Boetie, etc. But the apostrophe attributed to Aristotle, articulating a performative contradiction, also opens friendship to its own deconstruction: if there are no friends, how can one address friends? And how to draw the line between the friend and the enemy, a basic opposition to which Carl Schmitt attributes a central role in the definition of politics? Even the origin of the quote is obscure, as its attribution to Aristotle by Diogenes Laertius and subsequent authors is purely based on hearsay and its aporetic nature contradicts the clarity of the Greek philosopher's prose. The destiny of this ambiguous quote provides a common thread to the book and indeed to a significant part of Western philosophy, as it runs through the work of authors as different as Montaigne, Florian, Kant, Nietzsche, Blanchot and Deguy. A large part of Derrida's book is devoted to the commentary of Nietzsche's even more paradoxical statement, in *Human All Too Human*, that subverts the quotation by reversing it: 'Friends, there are no friends!' thus said the dying sage; 'Foes, there are no foes!' say I, the living fool. Here the friend is converted into the enemy, the sage passes himself off as a fool, and one is not sure whether to rejoice or to mourn the disappearance of the enemy which, if one follows Carl Schmitt, puts into question the very existence of the political. The question of counting or enumerating people--how many friends are there, how many are listening to the apostrophe that there are no friends--is also one of the lecture's recurring theme, which ironically points toward the obligation made to the teacher to register the attendance and count the number of students in the classroom (an obligation that Derrida conspicuously avoided) as well as to the ideal number of citizens that a functioning democracy cannot exceed (which, according to Aristotle, was less than 10 000). As Derrida points out, there is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity, which by definition one cannot count, but there is no democracy without the calculation of majorities and the addition of equal, identifiable citizens. This paradox suggests the possibility of a "community without community" which, according to Derrida, would characterize the "democracy to come". The key to this insistence on number is only given at the end of the book, when Derrida shows that, according to the way the omega is accentuated in the original Greek quote, the paradoxical interjection: "O friends, no friends" can also be translated, more prosaically, as "Many friends, no friends", or "he who has many friends can have no true friends." This philological coup de theatre does not eliminate the fecundity of the original quote, which functions as a textual machine producing its own discourse as if granted with a life of its own.

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