DruzhbaOleg KHARKHORDIN

, [Friendship], Saint-Pétersbourg : izd. Evropejskogo Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2009, 455 p.

Evert van der Zweerde

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Oleg KHARKHORDIN, ed., **Druzhba, [Friendship], Saint-Pétersbourg : izd. Evropejskogo Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2009, 455 p.**

1   This book, the third volume in a series named "The Pragmatic Turn" published by the European University in Saint Petersburg, is a fine specimen of original and inspiring research currently done in Russia. The book consists of two parts: a more general discussion of friendship in the history of political thought and in sociology, and a more concrete part offering detailed investigations in the field of linguistics, sociology, history of (religious) ideas, and international relations, written by various specialists, and all addressing the notion of friendship. The book is clearly motivated by an interest in the topic of friendship, and, more specifically, in the question, how the notion of friendship can be extended beyond the close and intimate kind of relationship that have dominated discussions, in the West at least, since Michel de Montaigne, and that were discussed by C.S. Lewis and others. Can "political friendship", in the Aristotelian sense, but transposed to late- or post-modern conditions, form the basis of a "good society"? Can other forms of societal friendship, e.g. in the form of what Kharkhordin labels "friendly networks" (*druzheskie seti* (p. 15)) change their function from the *counter*-society that they were in the USSR to that of a viable alternative form of civil society in post-Soviet times?

2   The most fascinating feature of this book is its combination of sociological investigations and research into the social theology of the Orthodox tradition (Gregory of Nazianze and Vasilii the Great). This arguably is the most promising dimension of the research, too, if it would succeed in laying bare the *deep grammar* of Orthodox and Russian social imagery and conceptualization, thus reaching the level of an ontology of the social. Earlier work by Kharkhordin [*The Collective and the Individual* (California UP, 1999)], in which he related the early Soviet pedagogical practices developed by Anton

Makarenko that later became the foundation of the *kollektiv*, to the practices of Russian monasteries, and in particular to the opposition of the early 16th century Orthodox monks Nil Sorsky and Joseph of Volokalamsk, has shown the fruitfulness of this approach. If it is true, as Kharkhordin suggests, that Patristic authors are at the basis of this grammar (which obviously has roots that go farther back), then differences between Latin and Greek Church Fathers may serve to explain differences between "Russia" and "the West", when it comes to such phenomena as political friendship and friendly networks.

3   Is there such a thing as "Russian friendship"? At this point, two lines of thought are present in this book. One is a "universal" notion of friendship that fits well into present-day discussions of political or civic friendship, and that draws on sociological literature on the one hand, thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Maurice Blanchot on the other. The other line is an attempt to assess the nature and future of socially relevant friendship in post-Soviet Russia. Both lines are interesting enough in their own right, but even more interesting in their connection and comparison. Kharkhordin and Kovalova find, for example, five "degrees of closeness (*gradatsii blizosti*)" that "are determined by" five words in Russian, viz. acquaintance (*znakomyi*), friend (*khoroshii znakomyi /priiatel′*), friend (*drug*), close friend (*blizkii drug*), sexual closeness (*seksual′naia blizost′*) [p. 53]. English does not distinguish between *priiatel′* and *drug*, nor do German (*Freund* for both) or Dutch (*vriend*). What may further surprise is that "sexual closeness" is placed at the far-end scale, as if a sexual relationship would be an "even closer friendship"; for many Westerners it would rather be on a different scale altogether.

4   The question is whether such scales are gradual, and hence whether a division into four or five categories is accidental, or rather brought forth by particular, specifically "Russian" social circumstances, which, at the same time, those categories "reproduce". If there is a relevant difference between friend-*priiatel′* and friend-*drug*, then this is likely to make a difference for people's behavior, too, for example when I warn my *drug* that X, instead of being a *drug* too, is in fact a mere *priiatel′*, and hence not to be trusted. This indeed seems to be the case if "unconditional support is what distinguishes a friend" [p. 58]. *Unconditional* support implies that, if a friend has to choose, for example between betraying his friend or going into the KGB-cell himself, or between helping me to buy a plane ticket or helping my competitor in business, my *true* friend is the one who chooses me. If he doesn't, the friendship was conditional. Which is to say that friendship- *priiatel′stvo* implies a readiness to "enmity" (there is no grey zone between betraying and not betraying someone to the KBG), or at least indifference, but also that friendship-*druzhba* is not incompatible with "utility".

5   There may indeed be relevant differentiating circumstances at stake. The condition for being friends with everybody is, among others, absence of a KGB. The condition of strictly separating friendship and utility is, among others, plane tickets and money galore. Obviously, in the former USSR, the difference between a trustworthy friend and a "friend" who might calculate her or his own interests, even in a context of "sexual closeness", was crucial. Given the fact, however, that absence of secret services and plenitude of consumer goods are only relative in *any* society, the difference is universal and would have to be "potentially expressible" in any language.

6   Do cultural and, more specifically, religious traditions merely yield conceptual material or do they actually "shape" social reality? Is that a mistaken alternative? What type of continuity is there diachronically, and which types of influence are at play

synchronically? How and why do meanings shift? How are such shifts related to practices? What this book makes clear is that the concrete forms of friendship, existing or domineering in a given society and a given period, indeed relate to the predominant political, social, and economic characteristics of that society and period. The question is: how exactly? And also: how to research this question? In his contribution to the volume, Dmitri Kalugin suggests: "To the extent to which the concepts that we study are conceived by as us as historically conditioned, we depart from their immediate dependency on the cultural and social perceptions (*predstavleniia*) that exist in every concrete period" [p. 188].

7 As Anna Kovalova and Kharkhordin state in their empirical study of "degrees of closeness", friendship is hard to assess sociologically, because it is located on the border of private and public spheres [p. 49]. This might explain why societies that rely, in their own predominant terms at least, on a strict separation of those two spheres, have a hard time finding appropriate concepts for friendship that is not private. But that does not mean that it does not exist — it simply means that we have to invent or retrieve the appropriate concepts.

8 One of Kharkhordin's suggestions is that "light might be shed on the solution of contemporary problems" by reaching back beyond Modernity and the Middle Ages to Ancient Greek, Roman, and early Christian notions of friendship that, contrary to individualized and romanticized Modern friendship, make it possible "to befriend thousands" [p. 21]. The key notion of *political friendship* [*politicheskaia druzhba*, derived from the Greek *filia politikè*] returns as a key concept in thinking about alternatives for the "atomized" individual-based relations of modern society, but also, one could add, for the "thick" notion of community proposed by "communitarians". In this respect, the work of Kharkhordin can be fruitfully connected to thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Roberto Esposito, or Semën Frank.

9 Maybe the key sentence of this book is the following: "In this sense we are all Ancient Greeks, insofar as we retain the capacity to become friends with another by means of the performative effects of speech acts [*rechevykh aktov*] of a particular kind" [p. 33]. The key to understanding what Kharkhordin is talking about is to realize that writing, pace formalism and structuralism, is a form of *speaking*, too. To write and publish is to seek an audience, a word that not accidentally retains the connotation of hearing. From this perspective, the sentence just quoted is such a speech act, with the first person plural "we" as its intended *effect*. This perspective is applicable to the book itself: "academic" books, too, are neither merely text nor context. This book is a performative gesture, an invitation to take the notion of friendship beyond the limited domains of both sociological research and the idealization of "true friendship" within the unfathomable depths of the private sphere.

10 Oleg Kharkhordin, in the long opening chapter that lays the theoretical groundwork for the remainder of the book, is cautious to warn that he "does not have recipes for the solution of Russia's problems", yet he does suggest that "Russia, if we think of it in terms of the model of such political friendship, would look rather like a network of spaces, united by the fact of communication in the Russian language, than like traditional nation with its physical and territorial borders" [p. 44]. And he continues by asking if, in that case, we can "determine such a friendly network that goes under the name 'Russia' as a mere collection of bearers of the canonical texts of Russian culture and a community of interpretation that exists around them" [ibid.]. At this point, at

least two questions arise. The first is, obviously, who or what decides which texts are canonical — ultimately it must be some "who". The obvious answer, namely: the members of the interpretative community, simply displaces the question to the question who decides *who* is to be (or: become, since such a community is in fact a dynamic and reproductive process) a member of such an interpretative community. The answer, again obvious, that this will be determined by the validity of interpretations offered, once again dislocates the question. This is the more pertinent if we realize that "interpretative communities" tend to determine themselves and the parameters of their membership in opposition to other communities and via the exclusion of interpretations or the privileging of some over others. The second question, therefore, is if this limitation to "canonical texts" and to culture does not imply to overlook the unfriendly dimension of the political, viz. enmity, opposition, oppression, etc. Every community depends on what Foucault labelled order of discourse, exclusionary by definition, so that the *truly* political question becomes how to deal with this predicament of a plurality of mutually exclusive "orders".

11 Paradoxically, the answer is contained in Kharkhordin's own notion of a "network of spaces": in addition to a union of such spaces due to a shared language, there are spaces due to shared traditions of translating and to other trans-cultural practices, all of them intersecting and criss-crossing (with) each other. To understand "Russia" — or, by analogy, any other "country" — in the manner proposed by Kharkhordin makes it possible to say that people can live in Paris or San Francisco for generations and yet be part of "Russia", but they will also be part of a lot of other "networks of spaces". The effect is that "Russia" — like France and the USA — ceases to exist as a *separate* entity. The result of this will be a post-national network of networks that already exists at the level of academia and "high culture" and of which this book, part of a joint research project of Saint Petersburg European University and the EHESS in Paris, is a specimen. The whole question then boils down to asking if this situation can be expanded to include all domains of social, economic, and political life, and also if it can be "just friendly". Can the whole world be a friendly *Greenwich Village* or *Rive gauche*? If friendship is radically open in the sense that any human being can become a friend (and, of course, an enemy) of any other human being, it becomes difficult to limit the notion to any particular space or country.