

# On intellectual friendship: For Peter Beilharz

**Craig Calhoun**

Arizona State University, USA

Thesis Eleven  
2023, Vol. 179(1) 200–205  
© The Author(s) 2023  
Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/07255136231217757  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/the](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/the)



The importance of friendship to the lives, careers, and accomplishments of intellectuals is too often neglected. Partly, of course, this reflects a pervasive modern individualism that is sadly prominent among intellectuals – including even those who denounce it. But from an older sociology of knowledge to more recent exercises in ‘positionality’, the individualism is countered by acknowledgments – or accusations – of class, gender, race, and membership in other salient categories (like tenured old guard or unemployed new PhD). Schools of thought are recognized along with training in actual, literal schools and employment in universities that shape, for example, the chance to work with graduate students, and in departments that confer disciplinary prestige and sustain distinctive styles of inquiry. But friendship is relatively neglected. Knowing Peter Beilharz reminds us that it shouldn’t be.

It is common to think of friendship in predominantly psychological terms. It is described as an emotional link, a relationship of mutual affection. This is obviously an important dimension. But it is a thin and one-dimensional account. As the anthropologist Robert Brain (1976) pointed out in *Friends and Lovers*, emotion and especially erotic attraction are very volatile bases for relationships. Passion can be short-lived. Indeed, part of what makes intense passions so memorable is that they are often short-lived. Love affairs, Brain suggests, are often steps outside the routines of ordinary life. We lose ourselves in love affairs, at least briefly. By contrast, we find ourselves in friendships.

Some friendships are specific to a phase of our lives. We keep up with only a few undergraduate friends, at most, no matter how many games of pool, glasses of beer, or discoveries of new music we shared. Long-term partners may weaken connections to friends from when we were single. In my case, moving between the UK and the USA located some friendships in time as well as space. We are more likely to stay connected when we enter related lines of work or live near each other, but losing touch doesn’t negate the value of friendship had in a different then and there.

---

**Corresponding author:**

Craig Calhoun, School of Politics and Global Studies, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ Arizona 85287-3902, USA.

Email: [craig.calhoun@asu.edu](mailto:craig.calhoun@asu.edu)

Still, friendships help us ‘find’ ourselves most when they endure through different phases of our lives. We are always becoming, changing, and friendships both develop with us and offer a mirror in which to see our old and new selves with accent on continuity. Changes may be incremental and small, recognizable more in retrospect than in the moment. Hey, friend! You’re not an aspirant anymore, not an up-and-comer; you are established, a senior colleague; what are you going to do with that new standing? Sometimes changes are abrupt, marked by big events like relocations, repartnerings, or, occasionally, rarely, a radical reorientation of intellectual direction and passion. The young Marx reads Hegel. The mature Zygmunt Bauman reads his wife Janina’s memoir (Bauman, 1986) of the Warsaw ghetto and takes up Jewishness, modernity, and his own early life in new ways after decades of reticence, reshaping his own sociology and that of many others from the late 1980s (Bauman, 1987, 1989, 1991).

Peter Beilharz and Zygmunt Bauman were friends. Lovingly recounting the friendship was, for Peter, also an effort of self-exploration, clarification of personhood and vocation (Beilharz, 2020). The same can be said of Peter’s account of the work of Bernard Smith (Beilharz, 1997). Peter reflects on Antipodean perspectives on the world and on the relationship between intellectual life and different genres of cultural production and participation as well as on visual art.

Friends help us clarify our values and aspirations. Indeed, they help us to realize our aspirations – not only for our work, or other relationships, but also for ourselves. This is part of what Aristotle, the pre-eminent philosopher of friendship, had in mind by suggesting different types of friendship. Friendships can be based on utility, or pleasure, or character. Aristotle’s typology can be rethought as suggesting dimensions of friendship rather than discrete types. All three dimensions shape, for example, Peter’s friendship with Bauman. Peter expands the understanding and readership for Bauman’s work in his expositions, interview, and anthology (Beilharz, 2000a, 2000b). What intellectual wouldn’t see the use of that? Bauman offers Peter both teaching and intellectual perspective but also engagement in British sociology through visits to Leeds. They have fun, perhaps aided by the little bottles of airline whiskey Bauman was in the habit of accumulating (and consuming). Knowing Bauman also helped the much-younger Peter to know himself at mid-career. Reciprocally, in conversation with Peter, Bauman reflects on his own long life, his experience of transformations and disruptions in the world, the trajectory in his work, and the unity and developmental pattern that has not always been evident (especially to the combination of fans and snide critics Bauman acquired as he became famous).

In short, friendships are an important part of making ourselves, developing character. Character for Aristotle is closely linked to virtue. It is the capacity, or disposition, to achieve virtue, to realize wisdom in action. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (2012) describes the importance of habituation as well as given nature and intellectual reflection. The capacity to be good is achieved partly by internalizing the ability to generate good actions as ‘second nature’. This is embodied but more dynamic than just rote learning. Such actions need to be right for specific situations and to balance extremes on various dimensions, as for example courage is to be found in the middle ground between rashness and cowardice. We gain this capacity in interaction with others, especially friends, but our learning is never quite finished, and exists not only in our bodies but in

the relational contexts of our lives. Old habits don't automatically serve us well in new contexts; we face displacements and sharp changes with shock and challenges to our consistent personality; we navigate transitions with the aid of friends. The theme was vital for St Thomas Aquinas and Pierre Bourdieu (whom too many sociologists read without much sense of his intellectual antecedents). Before reading either, Peter had, I think, internalized the core idea from playing the drums – and also learned the difference between playing the drums alone and in communication and improvisation and mutuality with other musicians.

Intellectuals need friendships for all the same reasons other people do. Friends are useful and friends are sources of pleasure. Where shared tasks and fun are involved, it is easy to form friendships. But utility and pleasure do not make friendships last or give them their deepest value. Rather, the most important and durable friendships are those in which people make each other better people and help each other achieve greater excellence in their work or life projects.

Friendships give specific sustenance to intellectual work. This starts with the simple importance of conversation. To be an intellectual is not just to be engaged with ideas, but to be engaged in conversation about ideas. The conversation may be direct and immediate. In our fantasies it often calls for some idealized Viennese or Parisian cafe or English pub. But really it takes only a table to sit around. Though few of us would endorse Zoom over co-presence, conversation can be online. We seldom use paper letters anymore – and readers of those relics of intellectual friendships in past generations can be sorry. We phone, we email, we meet at conferences and in the hallways of conventions; we add an extra stop to our travel plans.

When old intellectual friends meet, the simple act of catching up commonly segues into observations on the zeitgeist and intellectual attempts to grasp it. These days sober political observations are usually prominent, occasionally dyspeptic views on the state of disciplines or departments but also sometimes delight in the revitalization new scholars bring to old debates. Of course, the professional and the personal entwine. In Peter's and my generation news includes announcements of retirement and reports of its actual experience. But, if your friend is Peter Beilharz, catching up includes the excitement of new enthusiasms – collaboration with Sian! really interesting students in Sichuan! And new phases in old enthusiasms – new insights into old texts and intellectual puzzles, newly issued masters of old blues sessions! Intellectual friendships are not just repeated intellectual transactions; they involve whole people who always (though in varying degrees) are (thank heavens) more than only intellectuals.

This is more than giving each other moral support, though that is not trivial. Intellectual careers can be precarious, and increasingly so as universities remake themselves as neoliberal market actors. Universities often disappoint in how much they support their members, let alone provide effective support to wider intellectual communities. Beyond security of employment and income, there is precarity of recognition. Some intellectuals may be arrogant, but few are confident enough to be immune from wondering whether they are making significant contributions and, if so, whether these are having an impact. Those lucky enough to have the institutional support of academic jobs wonder if they deserved them – or literally just got lucky. Women, those from marginalized or

oppressed backgrounds, and the upwardly mobile are hit harder by these doubts – and perhaps more honest about them – but they are widespread.

For most of us, moreover, intellectual productivity involves a lot of sending out what amount to messages in bottles. We publish articles and books. Maybe someone reads them; maybe someone cites them; maybe this happens soon but more likely after we have moved on to other topics; maybe it never happens. We may wish even for a reader who misunderstands our work in place of silence. But seemingly silence has structural bases. Too much reviewing goes into anonymous vetting of articles for publication and too little engagement goes into the conversations of book reviews and debate. Too many journals exist to promote articles in a status hierarchy rather than to promote intellectual exchange. Reviewing does not garner much credit from assessment committees – or the assignment of many pages from most journals. And no wonder, because intellectual fields are large and beyond a narrow elite relatively anonymous. Part of what *Thesis Eleven* has achieved is an escape from this. It has grown in recognition and reach without sacrificing intellectual orientation and mutual engagement. That is, it has an intellectual orientation, an evolution that its founding editors gave it. It is from and partly about Australia but equally about the world; it is from and partly about critical theory but equally about the world this helps us observe. At the same time, *Thesis Eleven* invites mutual engagement. Its far-flung contributors are invited to make it an intellectual home, or, in a more cosmopolitan sense, a place to visit recurrently to know another perspective on the world. A sense of intellectual friendship helps make this possible. A prestigious but merely instrumental publication would not be the same.

It is not only *Thesis Eleven* that is best read as a shared intellectual activity. All serious reading is at its best a shared activity. There may not be anyone else physically at the desk or in the easy chair, but we read best when we read into conversation. This pushes us to frame more clearly what we have taken from texts; it shows us other angles of interpretation. Reading groups and seminars offer direct mutual engagement as we work through difficult and important texts. Most of us enjoy too few, especially after leaving graduate school. Even without the focus of an organized group, we learn about new (and sometimes old) work and discuss its significance in exchanges with friends and colleagues. Often this comes by email, but not simply in a broadcast mode. It involves specific messages among interlocutors.

Academic departments seldom sustain this kind of intellectual engagement. They are organized for other functions – as evidenced by how quickly conversations turn to ‘shop talk’ – recruitment, placement, retirements, budgets, rankings, and space issues – rather than discussions of the world our craft exists to help us understand. Nonetheless, there can be serious intellectual engagement at a meeting that also has a task function – say, a *Thesis Eleven* editorial meeting.

Simply saying ‘conversation’ doesn’t quite get to the importance of intellectual friendship. We can have an interesting conversation with near strangers after a speech at some distant university or with a new cohort of graduate students. It can be informed by some shared intellectual foundations and common interest in some current intellectual themes. But the greatest importance of intellectual friendship comes in connections across these and across time. Our friends remind us of what we cared about when we were younger and sometimes about how earlier contexts gave ideas and texts a different

significance from today. Worrying about current issues, we find it helpful to know what old friends are reading and thinking. One great contribution of longstanding intellectual friends is that new episodes of conversation can build on established knowledge of each other's pasts and general lines of thought.

When I first met Peter Beilharz in 1992, we were immediately drawn into friendly conversation. I didn't even know of the existence of *Thesis Eleven* and left Peter's office with an armload of back issues. Starting to read these on my long trip back to France (where I was briefly based at that moment), I was drawn into a conversation. The effect was similar to looking now at early issues of the *New Left Review*. Wow! There are EP Thompson, Perry Anderson, Charles Taylor, and so many more *talking to each other* – and at the same time writing for the rest of us. Likewise, *Thesis Eleven* was an invitation to an important intellectual conversation that was being carried out in public with an ever-broadening range of participants. It has been my pleasure to be a part of that conversation ever since, and no one animated it more than Peter Beilharz.

Even the most original ideas are commonly conceived and developed – and tested, refined, and changed – in dialogue. This is what seminars do; it is what the best journals do. It is what friends do late at night over wine, at conferences, and in correspondence. The dialogues help give us our bearings in the world. Even more, where real intellectual friendships are involved, they help us to achieve both continuity and creativity in those relations to the world.

## References

- Aristotle (2012) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Bartlett RC and Collins SD. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bauman J (1986) *Winter in the Morning: A Young Girl's Life in the Warsaw Ghetto and Beyond*. London: Virago.
- Bauman Z (1987) *Legislators and Interpreters*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman Z (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman Z (1991) *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Beilharz P (1997) *Imagining the Antipodes: Theory, Culture, and the Visual in the Work of Bernhard Smith*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Beilharz P (2000a) *Zygmunt Bauman: Dialectic of Modernity*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Beilharz P (ed.) (2000b) *The Bauman Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Beilharz P (2020) *Intimacy in Postmodern Times: A Friendship with Zygmunt Bauman*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Brain R (1976) *Friends and Lovers*. New York: Basic Books.

## Author biography

**Craig Calhoun** is University Professor of Social Sciences at Arizona State University. His most recent books are *Degenerations of Democracy* (Harvard, 2022, co-authored with Dilip Gaonkar and Charles Taylor) and *The Green New Deal and the Future of Work* (Columbia, 2022, edited with Benjamin Fong). More information may be found at <https://calhoun.faculty.asu.edu>.



Peter and Craig Calhoun, London, 2013