Modernity, Intimacy, and Friendship

They who would confine friendship to two persons, seem to confound the wise security of friendship with the jealousy and folly of love.

Adam Smith

Intimacy is a fundamental human need. But the modalities of its enactment and experience, its possibilities and constraints, depend on context and on place, as well as time. In this chapter I will address intimacy as part of Western developments without which the contemporary meanings attributed to friendship are unthinkable. I have chosen to sketch some key structural and cultural transformations in private life. The autonomy promised by intimate relationships takes on particular significance with the rise of industrial capitalism. But already in the commercial society described by the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment these personal bonds are discussed. In the literature on the history of friendship, works by Adam Ferguson and David Hume, but above all by Adam Smith, are almost always held up as the first modern documents lauding the intimacy of friendship. That thesis bears rethinking. Scholars have argued that this commonly reiterated interpretation misses the highly instrumental approach to intimacy taken by the Scots, and especially by Smith. I argue instead that early Romanticism is key to the meaning of intimacy in the modern sense; that the Romantics’ often exaggerated outpourings of sentiment prefigure a cultural valorization of intimacy in terms of mutual disclosure, something that gains particular traction with the diffusion of therapy culture in the 20th century.
A century before, however, it is Hegel who conceptualizes intimacy as offering the kind of modern freedoms we take for granted today. Via Honneth’s reworking of Hegel’s approach we will be able to address the central promise of intimacy – to find freedom in another – as central also to friendship.

The modern experience, public and private

When Siegfried Kracauer (1990, p. 54) writes about friendship as an ‘ideal community of free, independent persons’, he presupposes a modern society inhabited, made, and constantly remade by modern individuals. But what’s modernity and what do we mean by modern individuals? The various prefixes attached to describe its present qualities – post, late, second, reflexive – are testimony to different approaches. But there are some aspects that many perspectives on modernity share and that I will now draw in broad brush strokes.

It is a sociological commonplace that from about the 17th century, in European societies and then in societies that drew on European models of social and political organization, the arenas of human activity multiplied and became more differentiated, in the sense of both a pluralization of ways of life and internal fragmentation. The development of modern subjectivities is intertwined with the displacement of religious authority through science, the challenge to absolutism, and the struggle for a representative politics. Connected to these changes was the formation of a social imaginary that views individuals as closed units of cognition, a view that was systematized by the rationalist philosophers of the Renaissance (Burkitt, 1991; Elias, 2011). In the European imagination the birth of the individual is traced to the Reformation and the Renaissance, when individual identity is said to have replaced collective identity as the center of subjectivity. Its 18th century emergence in the modern sense presupposes structural changes that spell a thorough differentiation and pluralization of social subsystems: economy, politics, science, religion, art, law, and a distinct private realm gradually decoupled from one another and developed their own inner logics and mutual tensions. Science and art, for example, exit their service to religious and feudal authority, become relatively autonomous, and develop their own internal norms. Scientific refutations of religious dogma, but also scientists’ attempts to reintegrate science and religion, and the 19th century bohemian creed ‘art for art’s sake’ illustrate the changes.