

Lean on Me? The Falling Rate of Friendship

Monday 22 September 2008, by [SEARS Alan](#) (Date first published: November 2006).

It seems that we all have fewer people to lean on these days. The rate of friendship is falling in the lean world of 21st century capitalism. In very real ways, capitalist restructuring is isolating us from one another and creating a situation in which we all have less time to reach out to friends through the ups and downs of our lives.

The falling rate of friendship in the United States is investigated in a recent article by sociologists Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and Matthew E. Brashears. Since 1985, the friendship circles of people in the United States have grown much smaller. The average respondent to the General Social Survey shared confidences with about three people in 1985, while the current (2004) figure was closer to zero. The decline in sharing confidences outside of established couple and family relationships has been particularly dramatic.

We all need someone to lean on, now more than ever, as we face increasing precariousness in a society where job security is disappearing, the so-called 'war on terror' is generating fear and targeting people who already face serious discrimination, and social services are cut to the bone. It seems, however, that we are actually leaning on each other less.

The period in which these three sociologists note a drop in the size of friendship circles has been marked by a massive project of capitalist restructuring at the level of the corporation, the state and the global system. This restructuring, often identified in terms of lean production, has squeezed friendship out of our daily lives.

One of the key dimensions of this squeeze on friendship is the time crunch that many face in today's society. People who are employed are working longer hours and many are juggling combinations of part-time work that make for unpredictable and erratic schedules. Further, the unpaid work in the household done mainly by women is being increased tremendously by cuts to health and social services. These cuts download the responsibility for caring for people with needs into the home, for example by booting people out of the hospital more quickly, often in highly dependent situations.

Friendship thrives in unstructured time. Student life is a time that many people establish key friendships, based on having a lot of people around and some time to hang out. Of course, the unstructured time is being squeezed out as more students have to work longer hours in part-time jobs to make ends meet.

In fact, the lean ethos of contemporary capitalism frowns on hanging out. Even at the level of childhood, play time is being squeezed out by increased pressure to perform on standardized tests and driving longer distances to more structured activities. At work, intensification of our jobs means less time even to be even marginally pleasant to one another. Further, the atmosphere of insecurity is being used by employers to ramp up a sense of competition and individualism. Cuts in benefits and pensions and a shift to personal responsibility undercut the sense of a shared future that can contribute to solidarity.

Friendship is also undercut by the increase in poverty and homelessness created by cuts to social services and the elimination of programmes to construct new affordable housing. People do establish

important bonds in all kinds of difficult situations, but it can be very hard to maintain those connections when pushed into constant insecurity and flux. The sheer pressure of keeping life going under these circumstances often takes a huge toll on personal relationships.

Finally, capitalist restructuring has driven commodification much deeper into our daily lives. We have less and less access to public space, free time and non-market goods as these are cut or eliminated, forcing us to rely on buying and selling to meet our wants and needs. For most of us, selling means primarily peddling our capacity to work to employers, while buying means paying for all kinds of good and services regardless of our income, from food to housing to paying tuition fees for a post-secondary education.

Friendship has not been particularly susceptible to commodification, in contrast with many other areas of interpersonal connection. Sexual and dating relationships are marked by a feast of goods and services, ranging from the fashion industry to text messaging to fitness products. Marriages are recognized through expensive and commodity-laden wedding festivities as well as anniversary gifts, flowers, or exotic underwear to show you still have it. Child-parent relationships are heavily commodified, from the gluttony of the Christmas gift fest to back-to-school shopping. Indeed, there may be a connection between overworked parents being deprived of the time and energy to spend with their children and the substitution of commodities for real shared experience.

Friendship is not particularly commodified and thus has a relatively low profile in popular culture. The TV series *Friends*, for example, was really about sex and dating rather than the ups and downs of friendships over time. All in all, friendship lacks the mystique of more intensely commodified relationships, which seem to acquire allure from their connection with market exchange.

Marx's idea of commodity fetishism was that we attribute human powers to things exchanged on the market and see the actual realm of human existence as dull and thing-like. The seemingly impersonal move of stock prices up or down, for example, seems to have an impact on the lives of millions. It actually feels like the goods and services are working it out between themselves and then making us live according to their rules. The macaroni and cheese box says, "I don't care how hungry you or your children are, I am only available for my price." The very real social relations that underpin these transactions are invisible to us, what we see is powerful goods and services and apparently powerless people peddling their asses in crap jobs to meet the demands of a bunch of things.

The allure of the commodity is there in the grand mythology of the perfect wedding day (existing primarily for the photos of the outfits), just as it is there in the idea that you'll get laid if you have the right car, or that you should smother your kids in gifts on their birthday even if it drives your deeper into debt. Friendship, it seems, doesn't have price in the same way, and therefore tends to seem less important and to disappear from view. The rate of friendship is therefore in decline in lean times when we all need to count on someone.

P.S.

* From *New Socialist* no. 59, Winter 2006-07.