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Imagining Citizenship as Friendship in *The Big Chill*

Michael Kaplan

This essay stages a theoretically driven critique of Lawrence Kasdan's film The Big Chill *as a productive example of a constitutive contradiction animating the liberal political imaginary. In particular, it argues that liberalism relies irreducibly on an under-examined conception of friendship to supply its model of citizenship as a distinctive, ideologically overdetermined form of sociability and demonstrates the de-politicizing effect this reliance produces on liberal civic commitment. By situating the film in relation to theoretical critiques of liberalism, capitalism, and modern forms of sociability, the essay brings into focus the ideological lineaments of the liberal politics of friendship.*

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The debate concerning the political consequences of the Sixties is a cliché comprising an interminable series of other clichés. Surely nothing is more tiresome than the old argument about whether the Baby Boom cohort "sold out" its political principles when it opted for professionalization as the safe route to middle-class respectability. Every facet of this claim has been explored both in the popular press and in academic literature, to the point that the endless narration of Baby Boomer travails has itself come to stand for the generation's putative arrogance and narcissism. It is surely evidence of this narcissism that too frequently the period's many heterogeneous political projects and their socially diverse advocates are synecdochally represented by the white, middle-class, collegiate minority whose ascension to Yuppie-hood prompts the very charge of "selling out." Yet this reductive locution's salience is not itself reducible to the visibility and supposed cultural hegemony of the demographic segment it impugns. The much more sophisticated cultural critique taking place across the human sciences since the Sixties has been motivated in no small part by equally sophisticated versions of this banal question: If something like revolution (that is, thoroughgoing, leftward social and political transformation) appeared

Michael Kaplan is Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Public Culture at Indiana University. Correspondence to: Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University, Mottier 209, 1790 E. Tenth Street, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA. Tel: +1 812 333 1351; Email: mikaplan@indiana.edu

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imminent at that time, what are the features of contemporary democratic politics and culture that so effectively precluded it?

In question is precisely the nature of this "revolution." For example, in Anthony Giddens's account, we are confronted not simply with a demand for *emancipation* (say, from the undemocratic trespasses, within and beyond the nation, of a warlike state edifice; or from cynical corporate rule; or from patriarchal oppression), but also, and more primarily, with a *shift* from emancipatory toward cultural or "lifestyle" politics.[1] This is a transition in which emancipation is presupposed as both necessary and by itself insufficient. Clearly, it would be facile to identify this shift with the Sixties; it would be more accurate to assert that the Sixties marks the moment when the character of the shift—which, as an effect of growing mediated reflexivization of modernity, had been developing over a longer period—became clearly comprehensible, with the consequence that the logic and project of emancipation came unexpectedly to appear as a *lost politics*. This appearance of loss is in fact the form in which the shift is apprehended *from within* a cultural space organized by the political primacy of lifestyle projects.

Which is not to say that the shift is itself politically neutral. On the contrary, the strong case has been forcefully made that a politics revolving around the reflexive project of self-development or identity-formation is inherent to the logic of late capitalism.[2] In fact, the debate concerning the democratic prospects of lifestyle politics is the foundational controversy within cultural studies and between cultural studies and its others. Hence, for example, Wendy Brown's lament concerning the leftist abandonment of what she calls "politics of freedom" in favor of litigation over status recognition.[3] The latter form of politics is correlative to a Foucaultian privileging of micro-resistance articulated as a "project of the self," which provides the basic coordinates of the political as a relation of recognition between the liberal individuated "private" citizen and the state. Even if—or perhaps insofar as—this is the case, however, no "return" to emancipatory politics is either possible or sensible, and the nostalgic veneration of such politics must itself be regarded as a product of the late-capitalist *episteme*. If emancipatory politics seems in retrospect to have been linked to a sense of community forged in solidarity and legitimated by reference to suspect "grand narratives" of *egaliberté*, the emergence of a new species of reflexive citizenship lacking even such imaginary guarantees presupposes a certain fantasmatic loss.[4] That is, to force a marriage of Arendt and Baudrillard, what is "lost" is the imaginary itself—the (always illusory but structurally indispensable) *appearance* of absolute or rational authority grounding judgment and action.

From the perspective of late modernity, the Sixties feminist dictum "the personal is political" is to be understood as "the political is personal" and seen not as a polemical challenge but simply as a descriptive observation. And the palpable internal contradiction inherent in this formula has emerged as an urgent theoretical challenge and pervasive theme, persistently framed as a question concerning what constitutes democratic politics and where in social life it is, or ought to be, located.[5] Moreover, this question has not gone unregistered within the popular imaginary.

Lawrence Kasdan's 1983 comedy/drama *The Big Chill* concerns precisely the proper location of politics in liberal late modernity.[6] Widely recognized as a loose remake of John Sayles's 1980 landmark independent feature *Return of the Secaucus 7*, the film is a rare case in which the question, "Did the Sixties generation sell out?" is fairly explicitly posed, a fact not lost on reviewers at the time.[7] Media critics of the film on both the left and the right understood the film to be addressing precisely this urgently vexing question, the difference usually being that leftists despaired of the affirmative while conservatives derided the very gesture of posing the question as lefty self-indulgence.[8] Given this clarity of focus, two features of the film immediately present themselves as pivotal. First, the rhetorical strategy by means of which the film addresses the problem of "selling out" is to transpose it into a question of the proper or relevant *site* of politics. Second, the contradictory site proffered is friendship.

When, in a 1993 article, James Jasinski offers a defense of the film against both leftist and conservative critics, he shifts the accent of their arguments, claiming that the former "read the film as an exercise in conservative nostalgia," while the latter "attacked the film for its valorization of sixties culture and politics."[9] While both criticisms are palpable in the sources he cites, the concern about "selling out" is, in fact, paramount. The contrast between receptions of the film oriented by this polemical concern and Jasinski's reappraisal of it as an allegorical narrative about the prospects of "communal reconstitution" explored through the heuristic metaphor of friendship is only the most immediate effect of the film's rhetorical strategy, which is precisely to displace the question of the fate of collective action aimed at structural reform in favor of an investigation of intersubjective practices and optimal personal bearing.

In a way, this gesture must seem logical. After all, forced to acknowledge, in the Eighties, that the Sixties revolution never came off, its veterans would seem to have no alternative but to seek satisfaction elsewhere. But the rhetoric of political displacement is a pervasive, even dominant, phenomenon in the contemporary social imaginary. Extending well beyond appraisals of a given historical period or conjuncture, the strategy is prevalent in narratives concerning race and gender relations and has been advanced as a centerpiece of neoconservative social policy.[10] Ultimately, it can simply be identified with liberalism itself, since it derives, however circuitously, from the classical liberal conception of the private or intimate realm as the privileged site of human authenticity. From its inception, the liberal project has aimed to circumscribe politics in relation to a valorized private sociability modeled by friendship.[11] However, that the political relentlessly "returns," in the liberal social imaginary, to the site of privacy from which it is normatively excluded is conspicuous and revealing. Insofar as the priority of privacy over politics is axiomatic for the liberal order, there emerges an overdetermined affinity between the banal topic of "selling out" and the theme of friendship in popular narratives. *The Big Chill*, then, is exemplary because it integrates and exposes to analysis the signature stratagems of liberalism and its critiques on this point. The film's recourse to allegory (rife with untimely bonhomie and underscored by a brilliantly insidious soundtrack) as a means of asserting its distance from what it construes as merely polemical skirmishes

over the legacy of the Sixties itself aims to depoliticize what persistently appear within its diegesis as ineluctably political anxieties.

The narrative commences with seven friends gathering for the funeral of Alex, an erstwhile member of their group who has unaccountably taken his own life. As we learn later in the film, Harold, Sarah, Meg, Karen, Sam, Michael, and Nick had attended the University of Michigan with Alex in the Sixties, where they had been actively involved in the political movements of the time. Nearly two decades later, having kept in touch only intermittently, all have abandoned their political activities for other pursuits. Harold, who owns a chain of athletic shoe stores, is now married to Sarah, a physician, who once during their marriage had had a sexual liaison with Alex. Sam has become an actor and stars in a television detective series. Karen is a housewife raising two children; Meg is a real estate attorney; Michael writes for *People* magazine; and Nick is a cynical former radio therapist turned peripatetic drug dealer. For his part, Alex, who is described as the most intellectually gifted member of the group, had since college pursued a series of occupations, none of which appeared to hold his attention. Just prior to his suicide, he had moved into a dilapidated house on Harold and Sarah's property with his much younger, psychically traumatized girlfriend.

Alex's function in the narrative is akin to that of Seymour Glass in J. D. Salinger's stories: he is a kind of "vanishing mediator" whose absence acts as a diegetic presence necessary to drive the narrative by supplying the screen upon which the animating anxieties of the other characters are projected.[12] His (dis)appearance mediates within the diegesis the transition from "failed" collective emancipatory politics to the emerging politics of personal authenticity.[13] His death is a shock not only because it comes as a surprise, but more so because, as the apparent culmination of some inscrutable trajectory, it puts in question the post-collegiate life paths of all the other members of the group. If the one among them endowed with the greatest potential to bring about meaningful change in the world had failed to find meaning in his own life, there must be little to justify their own, less altruistic endeavors. It is this anxiety that permeates and orients all the interactions among the friends as they spend the weekend following the funeral at Harold and Sarah's home. Each represents a distinct, evolving perspective on the meaning of, and questions raised by, Alex's suicide. As the film progresses, the conversations among the friends make it clear that an inexorable preoccupation concerns their inability to sustain their political commitments and, more centrally, to live lives that comport with their once inalienable political ideals.

In his reading of the film, Jasinski not only rejects the proposition that the film rationalizes "selling out," but insists that this is simply the wrong critical question to ask: "rather than urging quiescence and adopting an apolitical stance, *The Big Chill* offers a critique of what can be termed 'the politics of intimacy' and adumbrates an alternative form of politics grounded in the virtues of friendship."[14] The film's critics, he argues, are blinded by their own ideological investments and fail to grasp the import of this critique, which "eludes easy ideological categorization."[15] In other words, the film is not a polemic rationalizing the abandonment of civic commitment but a systematic critique of self-defeating political practices prevalent within the

liberal framework. Here, then, is how Jasinski conceives the problematic addressed by the film:

> As the film develops, we are told that the seven old friends, in an earlier period of their lives, fashioned a *sense of community* that seemed capable of providing *moral sustenance*. But that sense of community, we are also told, had begun to erode as the group made its way in the larger society: values changed, beliefs faded, characters failed to maintain the practices that originally sustained the group, and the bonds of affiliation deteriorated. Alex's suicide—his apparent utter rejection of who he (and by implication his friends) had become—brings this disintegration to the surface. The group's challenge (articulated most directly in the minister's funeral speech) is to rediscover hope by (re)constituting their community.[16]

Pursuant to his reading of Hannah Arendt, "intimacy" is to be opposed to the "space that relates and separates" friends, a space she deems indispensable for the formation of an authentic public world. Eros and intimacy are, for Jasinski, synonymous and antithetical to *philia* and publicity, which are also synonymous. These identifications and distinctions form the theoretical frame of Jasinski's reading of the film, which he understands as a narrative about the relative advantages of *philia* over Eros in creating and sustaining a vibrant political community.

More specifically, the film is to be understood as "a complex disjunctive argument in which alternative 'persuasive communities' are constructed and juxtaposed."[17] From this perspective, the film's plot stages a linear progression in which these alternative communities are compared and through which characters evolve in accordance with the principles governing their respective interpretive norms. As a result, the audience is in a position to grasp the differences among these communal frameworks and to witness the consequences they entail. The ultimate goal and rhetorical effect of this diegetic strategy is to foreground what for Jasinski is a distinctly Arendtian faculty of judgment as the key to sustaining friendship as a form of civic bond and a privileged—or perhaps, from an Arendtian perspective, the only remaining—locus of civic virtue.[18] Thus we are faced with

> three persuasive communities. Each . . . is . . . centered on one of the central male characters: Sam, Nick, and Harold. As the film unfolds, the norms of each community (their values, beliefs, and practices) are disclosed. Sam and Karen constitute a persuasive community based on the norms of intimacy, Nick (initially) adopts the anti-community stance of the stranger, and Harold, Sarah and Meg establish a persuasive community grounded on the norms of friendship.[19]

In this negotiation among norms of "intimacy, estrangement, and friendship," the proper norms and privileged status of the latter will have been embodied by Harold and Sarah and articulated by a decision and corresponding act performed by each at the film's denouement. Paradigmatically, Jasinski asserts, "In the end, Harold, Meg, and Sarah come to embody an alternative communal possibility—one capable of restoring (if only on a small scale) lost hope—constituted by the values, practices, and norms of *philia*."[20] Thus he concludes, "*The Big Chill* counsels us that recognizing the limits of politics does not entail political resignation," since "[t]he

realization that politics . . . is an imperfect medium . . . does not lead . . . to 'complacency' or quiescence, nor does it relieve us of our obligation to act."[21]

It is my contention that Jasinski misses the definitively liberal, and ultimately antipolitical, impetus driving the film's rhetorical strategy, which aims to resolve the characteristically liberal tension between the requirements of personal autonomy and those of continuous political vigilance by relocating the "authentic" site of the political to the sphere of the personal.[22] If *The Big Chill* is to be viewed not as a polemical response to what appears as the abdication of Sixties social movements in favor of Eighties sociability but as an allegory in which friendship functions as a kind of laboratory for testing alternative forms of citizenship, this allegory cannot and does not remain merely heuristic. On the contrary, the disavowal of polemics is itself polemical, aimed at transforming the very meaning of "politics" in a way fully consistent with the liberal accent on modes of social attachment at the expense of concerns with the structural conditions governing the distribution of power. The film's reliance on the figure of friendship evinces—and ultimately serves to reinforce—the deep structural affinity between the intersubjective conception of political agency and the liberal model of citizenship (so trenchantly critiqued by one of Arendt's most influential yet disavowed interlocutors, Marx). This allegory thus reinvents for its historical moment the liberal logic it appears to repudiate, and it does so cunningly, precisely via the gesture of repudiation. The choice of friendship as the metaphorical vehicle of civic pedagogy is far from contingent, functioning to obscure the symptoms of a fundamentally liberal displacement of politics.

Friendship, Judgment, and Liberal Guilt

In responding to the film's invitation to be read as a kind of Arendtian "critique of judgment" accomplished through her distinctive conception of friendship, Jasinski astutely focuses on the way procedures of "character evaluation" index the friends' capacities to make politically salient distinctions. For example, during the after-dinner conversation on the group's second evening together, the topic of their collective history elicits the theme of their respective political commitments. We learn that Michael once taught in Harlem, where his girlfriend continues to teach, and that Meg "was going to help the 'scum', as I so compassionately refer to them now." For Jasinski, "Harold discloses an essential aspect of his character when he replies 'some of them *were* scum.' For Harold, making judgments or 'distinctions' is an essential practice."[23]

We are then offered an extensive analysis of this brief, easy to overlook exchange, necessary because the exchange evinces the logic governing Harold's practices of judgment, practices we are emphatically enjoined to understand as paradigmatic of the "alternative form of politics grounded in the virtues of friendship" advocated by the film. As the sole privileged practitioner of judgment in the film, Harold comes to be involved in two acts of friendship that demonstrate his eventual mastery of this "politics of friendship": at the conclusion of the film, Harold is able to "help" Nick—the stand-in for the enigmatically un-helpable Alex—by inviting him to stay and

work on the old house with Chloe; and he "helps" Meg by impregnating her at his wife Sarah's request. In order to understand the implications of these two acts of friendship, it is crucial to locate them within the trajectory of the film's—and Harold's—rhetorical development, something Jasinski does not attempt to do as he confines himself to tracing Harold's evolving understanding of "the emerging distinction between helping and saving."[24]

It is with his remark about Meg's former clients, then, that Harold first begins to emerge as the embodiment of the Arendtian virtue of judgment. Decisive in this regard, however, is less his capacity to *recognize* the quality of another's character and more his sheer willingness to *assert* his evaluation as the *proper warrant for political action or subjective stance*. That is, if, as Jasinski notes, "Meg appears embarrassed . . . making this value judgment," Harold is not, and this absence of embarrassment indicates less Harold's superior faculty of judgment than his greater self-assurance in deploying it.[25] And the film's endorsement, in this scene and in general, of such self-assurance functions to subject complex political dilemmas to the test of personal authenticity, construed as the capacity to act in accordance with one's reflexively produced disposition.[26] This reductive gesture constitutes—and is symptomatic of—the film's rhetoric, which it opens to a number of critical questions.

Why, after all, is Meg embarrassed? And why does she convey her embarrassment by ironically characterizing her own view as (less than) compassionate? Jasinksi suggests that she is embarrassed to *make* judgments. But this is surely not the case: after all, she already makes a practice of calling her former clients "scum." Nor is it likely that she lacks assertiveness, since, in addition to demonstrating it throughout the film, she certainly requires it as a successful corporate attorney. It must therefore be the case that she is embarrassed about what her judgment in this case reveals about her. She is reluctant to assert it directly, distancing herself from it by recourse to irony calibrated both to convey her desire to disavow it and to solicit her friends' reassurance, undoubtedly because it might indicate to them a violation of their erstwhile "communal norm." This other, apparently defunct, norm, far from militating against judgment as such, counsels caution in exercising it to sort fellow citizens, in recognition of the hierarchy between the social location of those in a position to judge and those typically subject to such judgments.[27] Was this norm not the very one she had intended to follow when she originally decided to help the underprivileged? Doesn't her current evaluation of them as "scum" betoken her own failure to retain the perspective that enabled her to judge not individuals "as such" but the meaning and valence of their actions in light of sociopolitical circumstances, or what Arendt calls "political facts"? In sum, does her willingness to consign an entire population to the category of "scum" now not amount to a *loss* of the capacity to judge? There is strong evidence to support this reading: if Meg is embarrassed to have arrived at this judgment, why doesn't she simply revise it? The problem seems to be that she feels incapable of doing so: although she fully and explicitly understands that it is not "politically correct," she feels constrained by it, as if it *imposes itself* on her consciousness beyond her capacity to resist it. This is the other implication of her

rhetorical irony: it expresses her disidentification with a view she nevertheless continues to retain.

On the one hand, her embarrassment simply masks her guilt: if people such as her former clients continue to merit her assistance, why has she abandoned her responsibility toward them? From this perspective, she *merits* guilt, so that Harold's response simply amounts to a kind of therapeutic rationalization: if "some of them" really "*were* scum," Meg has nothing to feel guilty about. It is vital to perceive accurately the logic of this rationalization. Even if *some* really were scum, the valorized capacity to make distinctions nevertheless ought to enable one to select those meriting help. But this is not what Harold's comment entails. Rather, the unambiguously asserted "fact" that some do not merit help simply means that Meg is not completely unjustified in failing to provide it. This is the substance of Harold's practice of friendship in this case: to assuage Meg's guilt by relocating its cause from the shortcomings of her character to "objective" features of those she (mis)judges. Ironically, then, we are confronted here with Harold's diabolical *refusal* to practice judgment. It is not simply that he effectively endorses Meg's failure to identify correctly those meriting help; rather, he fully absolves her of the responsibility to make such distinctions in the first place.

On the other hand, even Meg's guilt is not, as it were, simply her own, but is an effect of ideological interpellation and the structural transformations it facilitates and conceals. Meg feels constrained to pass this judgment (and is simultaneously guilty about its content) by her current position within the dominant ideological edifice, from the perspective of which, as Harold puts it, they effectively *are* scum. That is, since she has turned from asserting the rights of the juridically disenfranchised against the disciplinary apparatus of the state to asserting the privileges of capitalist elites under the aegis of the state, she has assumed the position of enunciation she once renounced. Not only does this fact entail her guilt, but it clearly marks the radically problematic status of judgment in a context where the range of possible stances in regard to "political facts" is constrained from the outset by utterly indifferent forces.[28] Whether those Meg once helped "really were" scum is not a simple fact to be discovered and asserted as such, but is always an ideologically mediated perception indissociable from the social location and access to power of the judging agency. Meg's guilt is thus double: beyond simply changing sides in the political struggle, she effectively has abandoned or lost her capacity to recognize (i.e., judge) the *ideological ground of the struggle itself*.[29] Harold's rationalization addresses precisely this latter guilt: what he effectively asserts is less the objective character of Meg's former clients than the possibility of exiting the terrain of ideology as such.[30] If Jasinski is right that making distinctions is an essential feature of Harold's character, then we are invited to presume, as Harold does, that judging is a function of individual reflection that, precisely, individuates us as liberal subjects—an essential, a-social capacity we share as human beings "pure and simple" and a constitutive responsibility we have as "private" citizens or, more precisely, friends. And it is this gesture of disavowing material power and ideological investment as conditions

constraining judgment that, via the exemplarity of Harold, forms a key element of the ideological project of the film.

The contours of this project emerge more sharply if, at this juncture, we compare *The Big Chill* to its forebear, *The Return of the Secaucus 7*. Here, the question of judgment is thematized in the context of a different "politics of friendship." Early in the film, Katie is emphatically, if ironically, established as the character most directly identified with the faculty of judgment. The group goes to a local playhouse to see a production in which Lacy, an acquaintance of theirs, is to perform. It becomes clear that, based on previous experience, none of the friends thinks much of Lacy's acting skills; however, when discussing their expectations just prior to the performance, the prevailing inclination among them is to refrain from expressing any overt criticism, resorting to euphemism or demurral. Katie, by contrast, immediately asserts about Lacy that "she stinks," at which point Frances chides her for being "judgmental." Nonetheless, she continues to berate the actress mercilessly, to the point that Irene declares, "Katie, you're heartless!"

Yet by this point it is clear that Katie's insistence on exercising and voicing judgment is more than a personality flaw. When, a bit earlier, she is cautioned that Irene's boyfriend, Chip, whom she has not met, is "straight," she fires off a series of questions designed to elicit the specificity of this "straightness": "Prep-school straight? Army straight? Political straight? Boy Scout straight? Plaid-pants straight?" In familiar Sixties jargon, "straight" was a polysemic characterization meant to pick out a set of personal characteristics—ranging from dress to musical tastes to abstinence from recreational drug use to conservative sexual practices—presumed to indicate sociopolitical conformity. The Sixties critique of conformity was strictly correlative to the imperative to resist a politically repugnant social structure—commonly referred to as "the Establishment"—and "straightness" was not equivalent to simple nerdiness but rather always implied a *form of consciousness*, a politically conservative ethos. The group of friends in the film is reuniting at the historical moment when the notion of "straightness" is in the process of losing this political connotation, evolving into a description of personal style irrespective of political bearing. This is why Katie finds it both possible and necessary to qualify the adjective as it applies to Chip. On the one hand, insofar as it is now possible to *mistake* the merely personal for the political, the distinction must be articulated for the sake of clarity. On the other hand, it is a distinction that, notwithstanding the historical shift undermining its critical purchase, remains crucial for Katie and her friends. It is the political salience of Chip's personal style that interests her, and Chip's political profile will constrain the range of possible relations between the two. In sum, in relating to a specifically political characterization ("straight") as it inflects affective modes of sociality, the capacity to make distinctions is invoked by the film in the form of a principled refusal to efface politics "in private"—a refusal much more in line with Arendt's notion of civic friendship as "partisanship for the world."

As the semantic transformation of the designation "straight" demonstrates, what is being lost at this moment is the status of politics as the proper sphere of social antagonism. If neoconservative depoliticization means anything, it means the

progressive evacuation of irreconcilable opposition from the space of institutional processes and public argument. Politics becomes devoid of the political—of that antagonism which bears on fundamentally contrary conceptions of the common good—and is reduced to negotiations over power sharing and administration.[31] One of the possible meanings of "the big chill" would thus be the cooling of properly political passions attendant upon the displacement of fundamental political disagreement. In *The Return of the Secaucus 7*, we are invited to imagine the (always already past) moment of transition to a "post-political" age. In *The Big Chill*, the passage is staged as a *fait accompli*, and what we witness is the friends' endeavor to orient social relations in the absence of a properly political imaginary. This absence is a palpable presence for them—it is the *raison d'être* of the film's narrative. But this palpability cannot overcome the absence: the missing political dimension persists as an inchoate irritant, and the friends are powerless to say exactly *what* is absent, let alone to bring it back.

One of the decisive differences between *The Big Chill* and *Return of the Secaucus 7* concerns precisely the role of the political in the subjectivities of their respective characters. The very title of the earlier film refers to the sense of group identity the friends have acquired as a result of having been arrested en route to Washington, DC for a political demonstration. The reunited friends share a disdain for the U.S. government, but this disdain is the inverse of the standard liberal attitude toward the state as a necessary evil to be minimized in order to guarantee maximum individual liberty. Their disdain is not directed toward government as such, but rather toward what they view as a de facto collusion of elites to maintain a grip on power at the expense of the citizens. It is, in other words, an emphatically *political* disdain, a kind of principled populism. While not inimical to the liberal political imaginary, it is set apart from the attitude typical of characters in *The Big Chill* in that it is absolutely integral to what might otherwise appear as "private" personality and modes of attachment—including, of course, sexual liaisons. That is, for the Secaucus seven, political bearing is an irreducible dimension of their subjective stances. Far from being displaced from the public to the private sphere, the political entails for them a permanent state of publicness as a constitutive feature of "private" life. This is to be distinguished from the Arendtian complaint that the public and private have hopelessly intermixed, to the detriment of the autonomy of the public realm. Indeed, this is a political orientation that closely resembles Arendt's model of friendship as marked by cognizance of "political facts." Certainly this form of politics is not to be confused with versions of consumer activism, in which it is simply everyday practices that are rendered political in the attenuated sense of responding to corporate behavior. In other words, although it is a form of political subjectivity intrinsic to liberalism, we are confronted here with a variant of "personal politics" in which the political retains its distinctiveness both vis-à-vis what Jasinski terms the "intimate" *and* vis-à-vis extra-institutional forms of activism.

Two scenes in particular attest to the salience of this distinction. In the midst of a heated political debate at a local roadhouse, Jeff responds to a claim advanced by J.T. with the words, "Horse shit! You want another beer?" Both the humor and the "social

realism" of the exchange depend on the jarring yet familiar contradiction in the respective tones of the enjambed statements. The expletive that expresses skepticism about a political claim is followed immediately by a personal signal of sociability. Not even a fairly passionate political posture is here permitted to interfere—even grammatically—with the discourse of friendship. The two discourses—political and personal—remain distinct even—or especially—when forced together by the hegemony of Arendt's "social." This state of affairs is to be sharply distinguished from the discourse characteristic of *The Big Chill*, in which the topic of institutional politics appears only obliquely in guilt-ridden, elliptical references to individual characters' long-past attitudes and activities.

In another scene later in the film, we see Jeff reciting a litany of his own arrests while being erroneously booked by a local cop for killing a deer. Following Jeff, his former lover Irene recounts her own, virtually identical arrest record, which diverges from his only for the short period they were apart. The import of this scene is complex. On the one hand, since all the arrests are political in nature, stemming from instances of public activism, they attest to Jeff's irreducible civic commitment. On the other hand, Irene's involvement in politics might be interpreted as stemming not from any political convictions of her own, but rather from her romantic involvement with Jeff. In the latter case, Irene would be guilty of the sin attributed to her generation by neoconservative revisionists of Sixties history, according to whom most young radicals of the period had no genuine interest in politics at all, but were "seduced" by the social aspects of the activist "lifestyle." Yet the scene also provides viewers with a chronology of events that bars such a reading. Simply put, given the dates of the arrests, Jeff and Irene had been involved in politics long before they became romantically involved. In sum, if there is a direct link between Eros and the political here, it runs in the reverse direction: it was, in part, political solidarity and civic friendship that ultimately drew the two friends together in sexual and romantic intimacy—not the other way around.

What is still more noteworthy in this scene is the casual yet insistent tone with which the audience is informed of the shockingly extensive record of arrests. Among other things, the list makes it clear that Jeff and Irene were never deterred by the prospect of incarceration; they relentlessly continued protesting and risking arrest. More to the point, if activism had for them become something like a "lifestyle," it is crucial not to take this term in its trivial or dismissive sense. Jeff rattles off the long list in a relaxed, almost wistful manner, but his memory of the dates, places, charges, circumstances, and dispositions of all the arrests is sharp and precise. It is clear that while his attitude toward having a criminal record is nonchalant, he is scrupulously faithful to the political endeavors to which it attests.

Taken together, these two scenes examine what it might mean to assume a principled political stance in a time when, for better and for worse, "the personal is political." It means cultivating an ethos explicitly linked to friendship, but in no way involves collapsing the boundary between specifically political discourse aimed squarely at public institutions and the norms of intersubjective attachment. At the same time, this film about a reunion concerns a certain loss—though it remains

necessarily ambiguous whether the loss has already occurred or is about to occur. The friends are in process of turning thirty, an age they regard as marking a transition from exploratory to enduring commitments. It is clear to them that the sort of political activism in which they had been involved cannot be among those commitments. This is so not only because "the system" has decisively won or deprived them of their will to struggle, but rather precisely because activism cannot remain a viable "lifestyle." If the system "wins," it is because the pragmatics of ongoing political struggle seem to mandate either entry into official politics (a course unpalatable to those who see official politics as corrupt) or a life of peripatetic dependence on those who have "settled down." In short, radical oppositional politics—that is, fundamental antagonism concerning the nature of the good—is granted no visible means of support. The ideologically produced loss of the political dimension that had engendered and sustained their friendship initiates a deterioration of the friendship itself, foreshadowed through the film's nostalgic tone. The anticipatory sense of loss is, of course, the impetus for *The Big Chill*—which is both remake and sequel at once—where friendship survives as a forum and repository of rationalization. In the latter film, the loss has clearly already occurred, Alex's suicide representing only its most direct and shocking encroachment into the everyday lives of the survivors. However, if in *Secaucus 7* friendship shares the fate of citizenship, in *The Big Chill* it becomes citizenship's alibi.

The complex itinerary, in *The Big Chill,* of the faculty of judgment as the locus of citizenship in the "dark times" of what Arendt decries as the reign of "the social" ought, therefore, to be explicitly delineated in relation to the film's own account of its historical moment. Thus, for example, Jasinski's communitarian reading—insofar as it ascribes to Sixties political projects an orientation marked by Eros and its drive to "save" everyone indiscriminately framed as in need of saving—implicitly understands the film as staging a kind of immanent critique. The form of immanent critique is itself crucial. On the one hand, it opens the question of whether the failure of Sixties revolutionary aspirations results from fundamental problems within liberalism itself, inviting the view that another political mode—say, republicanism—ought to supplant it. On the other hand, it opens the possibility of reinscribing liberalism itself as the "solution." Jasinski's view that the film opens the door to communitarian/republican revision is not simply erroneous; what it overlooks is the way this revision is itself the vehicle of liberalism's reinscription. The republican faculty of judgment, together with the projection of cultivating community, functions precisely to subvert in advance the immanent critique seemingly staged by the film. *Philia* disavows erotic intimacy, but in so doing it works to determine the genesis, meaning, and proper context of sociality and judgment in the intersubjective terms presupposed by liberalism.

It is no coincidence, then, that the privileged voice of judgment is Harold, the successful entrepreneur who hosts the group, helps Nick, and serves as Meg's surrogate. It is Harold who, alone, is able to extract the full measure of education from the weekend and consequently to make the distinction between saving and helping, Eros and *philia*. Evidently, successful participation in the capitalist system is

either a pre-requisite for, or a mark of, this capacity. Just as Adam Smith predicts,[32] the capitalist organization of social space makes it possible for Harold to distinguish his own private life from that of instrumental rationality, friendship from economy. Moreover, Harold is a success within the terms of a particular emblematic narrative of capitalist meritocracy—the self-made entrepreneur guided by his own ethos and ingenuity rather than benefiting from established (and suspect) social circuits of financial power. We are thus to understand that Harold's transition from youthful activist to mature businessman is itself an index of his capacity for making distinctions and exercising judgment. Harold, unlike Sam, Michael, and Nick, never worries about having "sold out"; he is utterly confident that the changes in his life are not properly described by this phrase. This confidence—indicated by the faux self-deprecation of his company's name, *Running Dog*—demonstrates that he is not susceptible to *doxa*: unlike his three male friends, he does not second-guess his choices from the imagined perspective of others or from within a paradigm (that of Sixties revolutionism) no longer operative or applicable. Harold's supposed independence of mind and entrepreneurial success are strictly correlative: they are both paradigmatic features of the properly constituted liberal subject.

In sum, Harold's apparently republican capacity to distinguish between Eros and *philia* tacitly depends upon his distinctly liberal capacity to prioritize private sociability over market relations. This is clearly evident in his willingness to violate SEC regulations in an effort to "save" Nick by offering him insider trading information. For Harold, the juridical and economic relations implicated in the gesture are merely instrumental, so that recourse to them is legitimated in terms of private loyalty, without any *political*—as opposed to technical or functionalist—regard for the consequences.[33] Unsurprisingly, he never comes to feel any guilt about "selling out" simply because, in his mind, whatever goals and activities—even political ones—he shared with his friends in college properly belong to the private domain of friendship, and entering and fully participating in the market bears no relation to that domain.

Friendship and the Political Economy of "Free Love"

It is not surprising, then, that if over the course of the film Harold—and, to a lesser degree, Sarah, Nick, and Meg—seem to cultivate their faculties of judgment, the narrative in no way suggests that they might exercise them in a public context, or, more to the point, in any way directed toward transpersonal ends. Nowhere is the shift in the very meaning of judgment more clear than in the development most manifestly designed to demonstrate Harold's and Sarah's exemplary perspicacity in discerning *philia* from Eros—their "gift" to Meg. Meg spends the weekend deliberating which of her "favorite men in the world" she would like to father her offspring. She asks Nick, who is impotent, as well as Sam, who declines by citing his reluctance to assume the moral obligation, but she excludes the married Harold from consideration. Sarah, who once had a brief sexual affair with Alex about which she feels openly guilty, decides that Harold should be the one to help Meg.

It is, then, Sarah's "gift" *of* Harold to Meg that perfectly exemplifies the ideological orientation of friendship in the film. Even as Sarah and Harold demonstrate the capacity to make nuanced distinctions in separating purely functional, procreative—as it were, contractual—sex from the kind of erotic desire that might compromise both their family and their friendship with Meg, the context for action is here thoroughly private, intimate, and, precisely, affective. It is only because the friends have known each other for many years; have undergone a variety of experiences together; have personally witnessed the development of their overlapping relationships; know each other's characters, desires, and needs as well as they know their own; and, indeed, directly love each other, that they can securely enter into such an arrangement. The kind of judgment displayed here never could be extended to a wider social world that includes individuals to whom the friends are committed in a civic sense—or to impersonal structures governing the context, meaning, and function of their friendship. Harold, Sarah, and Meg are confident in their evaluation of the risks involved only because they are longtime friends, and the capacity to make this evaluation is a function of their friendship, not a personal skill or character trait. Consequently, the evolution of their faculties of judgment throughout the film is away from the discomfiting activity, imposed by Alex's suicide, of interrogating the social, economic, and juridical presuppositions sustaining their friendships and toward a set of intersubjective practices that positively rely on the transparency of these presuppositions. Accordingly, at the very moment when the narrative argument the film has developed arrives at its conclusion, it demonstrates a distinctly liberal conception of sociality, relying on, and indeed promoting, a zone of private intimacy as the privileged site of authenticity and moral judgment.

Indeed, it is crucial to grasp the distinction between the case of Harold, Sarah, and Meg and a "world" of "inter-est" or "in-between" characteristic of Arendtian friendship. In Arendt's account, friendship functions to produce criteria of judgment that are neither abstract-universal nor merely idiosyncratic-particularistic.[34] Harold, Sarah, and Meg do share a world which supplies them with criteria for judgment that transcend their individuality without becoming portable abstract principles; and indeed the sexual act these criteria makes possible does not violate or collapse the distances between Sarah and Meg or Meg and Harold—nor introduces a new distance between Harold and Sarah. So it would seem that Jasinski is right to call attention to the distinction between Eros and *philia* functioning in this context. The problem, however, is not the possible collapse of interpersonal distance in erotic intimacy; rather, it is the active exclusion of "political facts" from the friendship relation. Harold and Sarah help their friend without harming either the friendship or their marriage, but the argument staged by the narrative positions the audience not only to recognize the exercise of judgment but also to accept private intimacy the *proper site* of its exercise. The three friends don't even tell their other friends what they have done.

Moreover, it appears Sarah's decision to "offer" Harold to Meg is motivated in part by the distance she did introduce between herself and Harold (and between herself and Alex, as well as Alex and Harold) through her dalliance with Alex. In other

words, in at least a functional sense, her "gift" to Meg squares her account with Harold. Granted, the two sexual acts have entirely different meanings for all involved; still, as Karen says upon learning that Nick is taking Alex's place at the old house, "there's a certain symmetry" between them.[35] In fact, it is because their meanings almost symmetrically invert each other—the affair is illicit and damaging to all three parties; the insemination is sanctioned by all three and benefits each of them—that the second act "balances" the first. After all, the benefit to Harold, apart from the altruistic satisfaction of helping a friend, is guiltless extramarital sex. He is, in effect, compensated in the only way possible within the contractual confines of marriage for the "loss" occasioned by his wife's infidelity. For her part, his wife is able to allay her own guilt. What surely appears to her as a selfless act, for which she undoubtedly congratulates herself, is effectively the conversion of a debt into an exchange that benefits her anew by retroactively inserting her betrayal into a restricted economy of gain and loss. As a result, Sarah will have gained the (ultimately self-canceling) pleasure of the affair itself, the restoration of balance in the sexual economy of her marriage, and a measure of narcissistic satisfaction arising from her success in legitimating the pursuit of her own ends by routing it through a performatively successful act of friendship. At the same time, to the degree that Sarah's gift is overdetermined by the psychic benefits it confers on her, Meg actually functions as an instrument in the production of these—and so no authentic gift, no genuine act of friendship, is really taking place, unless friendship is conceived precisely in the quintessentially liberal terms of calculative reciprocal exchange.

A theory of action that privileges the faculty of judgment is dangerously myopic if it marginalizes the constitutive role ideological motivations and constraints play in determining the scope and modality of judgment. Even if it were the case that in *The Big Chill* friendship supplies the criteria and cultivates the capacity for making nuanced distinctions between Eros and *philia*, this would not suffice to account for the kinds of actions the friends take in regard to one another or for the subjective meanings and social entailments of these actions. Sarah's gesture towards Meg is *enabled* by the friends' ability to distinguish erotic sexual acts from functional, reproductive ones—as well as sex from love and love from friendship—but her *motives* are selfish, not derivable from a conception of the good shared with the others. Certainly, she would be no less a friend to Meg if she had not offered Harold's "services." Rather, her act is overdetermined: on the one hand, by intensely private motives that have nothing to do with her goodwill toward Meg; on the other hand, by the debt, figured by friendship, securing all sociality yet dissimulated in liberal ideology.[36] In *The Big Chill*, then, it is *precisely through friendship* that the Sixties motto and (sporadic) practice of "free love" enters the circuit of exchange.

As a hallmark of the multiform resistance connoted by "the Sixties," the idea of free love bears a synecdochal relationship to the other oppositional practices and projects of the period.[37] It directly names and confronts the circuit of pleasure and eroticized prohibition through which capitalist sublimation was, at that moment, understood to work.[38] Though ranging widely in the meanings and effects ascribed to it, insofar as it sought to extricate Eros from sublimatory appropriation, "free love" aimed at least in

part to short-circuit the delay/detour through which the withholding of pleasure is transformed into a fetishistic attachment to market discipline. Thus free love does not simply oppose the "puritanical" regulation of sexuality, but in fact appears, at a particular historical moment, to threaten to destabilize the libidinal economy of capitalism itself. By contrast, *The Big Chill*'s representatives of the free love generation—it is made clear that many of the characters in the film had had "casual" sex with one or more of the others—have by the film's conclusion arrived at a point where sex has simply lost its "perverse"—and thus political—dimension. Sharing sexual partners has come to seem perfectly appropriate as an act of friendship precisely insofar as it is akin to sharing possessions. More importantly, this is reproductive sex, devoid of pleasure—or at least devoid precisely of the transgressive pleasure that is the whole point of both "puritanical" sex (i.e., sex within the economic circuit of sublimation) and free love sex-as-political subversion.[39]

The narrative contrasts the sexual act between Harold and Meg with a simultaneous one between Karen and Sam. If Harold and Meg are, despite the sexual nature of the act, engaging in *philia*, Sam and Karen are pursuing Eros—the Eros retrospectively attributed to the practice of "free love." Here, the narrative deviously evicts the liberatory dimension of "free love" by identifying it with the "repressive desublimation" driving adulterous transgression. The political aim of resisting, removing, or disavowing multifarious sexual prohibitions was to unshackle the subject from a repressive social order. The point was to de-link pleasure from libidinal regulation, which, in repressive desublimation, itself comes to be eroticized in such a way that only two essentially repressive options remain: either the subject obeys the logic of sublimation and channels her desire in socially (re)productive ways; or she derives pleasure from "transgressing" social prohibitions, so that these are re-inscribed as objects of libidinal cathexis. The project of "free love" was aimed at cutting this Gordian knot, situating the libido altogether outside the scheme of sublimation/desublimation. The subject would be free when her desire was no longer overdetermined by the blackmail of social prohibition. From this point of view, adulterous desire is, on the contrary, entirely the product of this blackmail, which it only serves to reinforce. And the Reaganite Right's success in effacing the distinction between pleasure derived from eroticizing the prohibition and pleasure sought outside its bounds was among the decisive victories of the Eighties culture wars.

No doubt the Reichian/Marcusean thesis of liberation contributed to its own defeat by underestimating the role of prohibition in generating desire and sustaining subjectivity. As others—most notably Lacan—have demonstrated, there is no desire or libidinal investment outside the sublimatory circuit of the (imaginary) social totality. The politics of "free love" was almost certainly doomed from the start. Nonetheless, it was most emphatically not doomed for the reason given by Reaganite revisionists—or the ideologically felicitous explanation endorsed by *The Big Chill*. "Free love" does not fail because it is little more than anti-social self-indulgence; it is not simply reducible to "perversion." It fails because some minimal libidinal organization—and thus "domination"—is the precondition of desire as such, so that, in effect, love can never be "free" and remain love. The rhetorical reduction of

the revolutionary project implicit in "free love" to narcissistic adultery is thus thoroughly disingenuous, aimed as it is at converting an inherent limitation of that project into an indictment of those who participated in its utopian dream in good faith.

The function of friendship in the sexual economy depicted by the film (beyond its role as the paradigmatic mode of attachment opposed to the debased and impotent miasma of citizenship) is effectively to depoliticize sex itself, or more precisely to reabsorb the excessive "pure" expenditure of sexual pleasure into a new hegemonic cultural logic whose defining gesture is the derogation of politics. No longer governed by "puritanism"—that is, by the now-defunct symbolic norms of sublimative capitalism—libidinal energies are now to be governed through the intimate self-discipline of Adam Smith's "moral sentiments" evinced in friendship, and by the interpersonal ethic of gift exchange.[40] If the rhetoric of free love sought to render visible the oppressive politics sustained by the public/private split, then the problem to be addressed by ideology was not simply how to displace politics into the private sphere, but rather how to depoliticize that sphere itself. Though itself a key product of liberal politics, the intimate sphere can only function as refuge from politics if it can be experienced as non-political, so this experience must be *staged* by re-coding politics *into the very structure* of intimacy itself, as intimacy's political unconscious capable of producing an ideological misrecognition of friendship as the other of politics. This is why Jasinski's reading of this paradigmatic transaction among the friends, precisely since it is asserted on behalf of a strong critique of liberalism attributed to the film, is finally indistinguishable from liberalism's definitive ideological gesture.

Friendship and the Utopian Politics of Skepticism

If, in Jasinski's view, Harold has learned that "[i]ntimacy—'saving' relationships—destroys the 'in-between' critical to public life," one ought to interrogate the meaning of the term "public" being advanced here. Given that Arendt conceives the "in-between" established by friendship as the elementary structure of the common, public "world," what is the fate of this "world" in the imaginary of *The Big Chill*? When Nick debunks Sam's nostalgic vision of the group's past friendship, he expresses his skepticism precisely by reference to "the world":

> A long time ago we knew each other for a short period. . . . It was easy back then. No one ever had a cushier berth than we did; it's not surprising our friendship could survive that. It's only out here in the world that it gets tough.

This platitude of "adult" discourse is not as simple as it first appears, as it laconically conjoins several pivotal themes in the liberal rhetoric of friendship. In what turns out to be one of the film's few direct references to class, Nick here suggests that both the trajectory of the group's political idealism and its self-understanding in terms of "pure" friendship are structured and bounded by the members' social location in ways the rest of the narrative never adequately addresses. At the same

time, this misapprehended friendship is sharply distinguished from "the world," so that, given the film's clear implication that the group's political and personal commitments were once coextensive, we are left to conclude that engagement in politics itself is to be distinguished from this new "world." If class privilege had been the invisible condition of both their friendship and their political involvement, the juxtaposition of these commitments with "the world" would imply an unexpected salience of the market there. A key implication of this view is that, in retrospect, the group's activism must itself have been an ideological delusion sustained by a silent investment, occluded by friendship, in an economic system and social logic which would be left undisturbed by their political projects—or would derail them at the first sign of such disturbance.

Insofar as his cynicism stems from a series of incisive observations concerning the relation between politics and friendship, it is completely inadequate to construe Nick's attitude as representing "the norm of estrangement" within an allegorical reading. The film's polemical dimension is nowhere more clearly in evidence. Far from simply being unconvinced about the prospects for "saving" or being "saved," Nick's disidentification with the alternate norms of friendship espoused by Sam and Harold carries a distinctly political import. This is what is implied by the ambiguity of "out here in the world." Where, in relation to this "out here," does Nick locate his friendship with the others? After all, he is criticizing Sam's idealized, "naïve" account of their relationship, experienced as it was in a sheltered collegiate environment—an "in there" opposed to "out here." What makes the group's college days the days of naïveté? Is it the founding of activism in unsophisticated, ideologically skewed political optimism—that is, thinking they could "save" people? At the same time, why should we accept the transparently ideological invitation to regard idealism and activism as naïve or even, in Berlant's terms, infantile?[41]

At first glance, then, even Nick seems to agree with Arendt: "private" or intimate friendship is superficial; it is only the "world" that can serve as the proper site of genuine friendship. But on closer inspection this agreement dissolves: the test of friendship is, for Nick, the duress that inevitably characterizes "worldly" life. The world Nick has experienced is in "dark times." Arendt, on the contrary, argues that duress generates only illusory friendship, mere transitory solidarity. Genuine friendship is, for her, known only on condition of full freedom, attainable exclusively in the political realm shielded from the demands of "necessity," whether natural or economic. A further difference is thus evident: Nick's "out here in the world" clearly does not correspond to Arendt's "public realm," inasmuch as he is almost certainly referring to forms of sociality characterized by market relations—the stranger sociability of the job and of consumerism; the instrumental discourses and relations colonizing every corner of the social universe. Nick, the drug dealer, daily encounters the utter permeability of the boundaries among the personal, the juridical, and the economic.

Thus when he expresses skepticism about the prospect of being helped, the scope of this skepticism is not adequately addressed by Sarah's and Meg's avowals of loyalty and care. This is because what "gets tough" are what Marx would call the "objective

conditions"[42] of social life under capitalism. His friends can surely aid him, but Nick is quite right that they cannot, in their roles as his friends, do anything to address the conditions that make the world in which he finds himself so tough. Duress will test their friendship, and they will pass this test; nevertheless, the friendship that passes such a test is, like Nick himself, impotent with respect to the political conditions which that earlier, naïve friendship attempted idealistically to challenge.

If we are expected to recognize Harold's discourse as exemplary, it is all the more crucial to note a key feature of Nick's moribund cynicism. In recounting the story of his radio therapy days, he tells Chloe that he quit as soon as he realized that people with genuine problems actually relied on what he knew to be superficial advice dispensed by him. That is, if Nick is a quitter in the mold of Alex, his rationale is governed by an ethical orientation: like Alex, something in him is "too good for this world." Cynicism is here one outcome of an ethical stance for which there is literally no worldly place. Unlike the case of Sam, we are not dealing here with the desire to "save" people—nor, contra Jasinski, are we dealing with a straightforward "norm of estrangement." Nick is neither naïve nor antisocial; his wish to help founders on the inadequacy of the means available for doing so. The response proposed by the film, however, is not to address the "political facts" obdurately impeding ethical conduct, but rather to overcome the resulting cynicism by renouncing as unrealistic the ethics motivating it. Of course, Nick's ethical stance effectively is unrealistic, since it does not comport with the nature of late modernity—or, more accurately, it is itself an ideological projection of mediatized therapeutic discourse. This is why the figure of Nick is both necessary to, and intolerable within, the liberal project articulated by the film. A cynicism capable of marking, however obliquely, the fatal constitutive contradiction of liberal depoliticization is here literally rendered impotent.

It is thus necessary to reject the notion that Nick's skepticism is successfully refuted, both discursively and in practice, by the emerging distinction between "helping" and "saving" and the corresponding faculty of judgment that enables some of his friends (Harold, Sarah, and Meg) to act in the spirit of Arendtian *philia*. It is crucial to note once again that the shift in emphasis from "world" to "help" entails decisive ideological and interpretive consequences. The larger point, however, is that *this very shift is itself prefigured* in what Arendt calls "the rise of the social" and what even the earliest liberal theorists explicitly identify as the central accomplishment of capitalism as a cultural logic. Nick's bitterness concerning life "out here in the world" is only one side of the coin that has his friends' capacity to help him as its obverse. What makes the world so tough is precisely what communitarians and republicans (among others) decry about liberalism and modernity—superficial, abstract, and instrumental relations among people who are debarred from politicizing their expectation of social obligation, from fully assuming both the civic bond and affectively-charged personal commitments. Enduring this world requires friends, but the very gesture of turning to friendship to mitigate the damage concedes that the dehumanized world itself is beyond deliberate collective efforts to change it—and dissimulates the fact that the very form of subjectivity required to sustain such friendship is what capitalism forecloses via the very gesture of promising it.

Of course, this is precisely the liberal position: for Adam Smith himself, "out here in the world" of economic transactions impersonal calculation rules—which is why the intimate world of friendship is far preferable and represents the very utopia secured by the innovation of capitalism.

Still, doesn't Nick himself accept the verdict against his cynicism when he agrees to re-join the "community of friendship" by moving in with Chloe on Sarah's and Harold's property? One is tempted here, against current fashion, to emphasize the conspicuously bourgeois nature of this community—after all, its site is literally private and secured by the unchallenged and even agreeable reign of private enterprise. But a more fundamental point to be made concerns the import of Nick's acquiescence, given the fact that he is clearly taking the place once occupied, both diegetically and structurally, by Alex. Is this replacement not also a re-signification of the place itself? Clearly, Nick differs from Alex in permitting his friends to help him—that is, his acquiescence precisely re-marks the nature of Alex's failure (earlier in the film, Michael explains his inability to stay in touch with, and perhaps aid, Alex: " I tried plenty; he resisted it"). We are to surmise that the ultimate trouble with Alex lay not in his inability to find meaning in the dehumanized world of instrumental relations—a trait Nick shares—but rather in his refusal to participate fully in the "community of friendship" available to him ("lost hope"). Nick, we are given to understand, learns from this fatal error.

It is important to pause here in order to consider more carefully the place Alex both occupies and fails to occupy in the plot, structure, and logic of the film. Jasinski claims that by the time Nick accepts Harold's offer to stay on his property with Chloe, "The existential question of Alex's suicide has been redefined and the film's moral lesson emerges clearly: acts of friendship—properly understood—are capable of restoring hope and (re)constituting community."[43] The thesis that Alex's suicide initially disturbs the remaining members of the group on an "existential" level obscures the possibility that the anxiety it provokes is from the start moral, ethical, and political, bearing precisely on the passing of (a certain determination of) *friendship itself*. After all, Alex's absence is overdetermined: it functions in the mode of (a) presence, as the missing/necessary signifier that marks and renders the collection of friends a *collective* (community or polity)—he *must* be missing for the group dynamic to take place in the form it does, yet he must have "really existed" for his absence to generate effects. It should be noted that the dead Alex is played by Kevin Costner, shots of whose face are deliberately excised from the final release of the film, generating one of the film's key indeterminacies in an explicit invitation to the viewer to read the accounts offered by the surviving friends as partial reflections of their own subjective stances.

But beyond acting as a sort of vanishing mediator, Alex is a *structurally missing* friend, the figure of (always really) missing friendship. Insofar as friendship is, strictly speaking, impossible in its very notion (because, as Derrida points out, the durability, authenticity, or, finally, actuality of its bond can never be properly tested and confirmed without thereby destroying the friends themselves—so that friendship always proceeds "as if" it *will have been* confirmed);[44] and because, within liberalism,

friendship names that mode of "pure" or authentic sociality which has been lost but is to be returned through systematic depoliticization, friendship marks a *constitutive absence* within the liberal organization of social life. Alex's absence inscribes both these conditions into the film's narrative structure. The test, initiated by his death, of friendship's efficacy in constituting stable subjects within a functional socius depends precisely upon the failure of friendship simultaneously signified by his death. At the same time, the radical implication of this fact (i.e., that total ideological closure is impossible) is effaced by the proposition that a sort of "ideal friendship procedure" can be installed which would preclude a repetition of such catastrophic loss. The ideological premise covertly posited here is that friendship is not a relation that has the power to confound all contingent social arrangements by short-circuiting subjective attachments to interpellative discourses (e.g., the failure of ideology to be subjectivized that Alex found unlivable), but is rather precisely the paradigm of autonomic contractualist sociality made possible by the liberal disaggregation of politics and the market from the realm of "sentimental" privacy. Liberal friendship is the only site of authentic sociality under capitalism, because it occurs within the only space where political and economic encumbrances are imaginatively suspended, and where only conscious free choice warrants entry into relationships. Friendship fails fatally not because in its very notion it functions as the site where ideological suture is unstable, but only contingently, when it refuses to follow ideology's prescription for robust sociality. Liberalism is precisely the promise to "return" to the subject his capacity for the kind of free association modeled by friendship. As such, it not only dissimulates the ideological production of the kind of subject it presupposes and requires, but must universalize a particular version of friendship as both paradigmatic and (always already) lost. This means, in effect, that liberalism arrogates the radical impossibility of friendship and presents it as contingent. Yet it counts on this radical impossibility to guarantee that the authentic friendship it promises to restore can never be restored—and that this failure will not appear as the failure of liberalism itself. In *The Big Chill*, Alex's death and physiognomic absence (ef-face-ment) thus function not simply as cinematic devices that appear transparently and only procedurally necessary to the plot, but also as the places of inscription for the overwriting of structural radicality by ideological contingency.

At the funeral early in the film, the eulogizing pastor, who never knew the deceased, struggles to impose narrative coherence upon the "seemingly random series" of events comprising Alex's life. This scene informs the audience both of the stakes of the narrative to come (i.e., can the rupture evidenced by the suicide be reinscribed within a narrative that would successfully account for it?) and the stakes of narrativization itself. Jasinski argues that the function of narrative being foregrounded in the scene—and the film as a whole—is its capacity to constitute what James Boyd White calls "persuasive communities."[45] However, the minister's comical effort is much more complex and ambiguous.

How are we to understand the ironic tension of this moment, which inheres in the minister's attempt to mime a knowledge of Alex he never had? On the one hand, this effort is a foil: we are to contrast the absurdity of a stranger trying to explain the life

of another with the presumably more authentic efforts of his friends—though in fact, if we are to take seriously the minister's suggestion that our task is narration, then in a sense he has got Alex right. On the other hand, beyond the question of personal knowledge or friendship, in classical Freudian terms psychic failure itself is a failure of narrativization: Alex's life will not have made sense to his friends, or to us, because it did not make sense to him. More radically, however, the ultimate coherence of any such narrative is always retrospective. Formally, then, the irony of the funeral scene invokes not only the diegesis and the friendship dynamic detailed in it, but ultimately the questionable coherence of the filmic narrative itself. Not only are we instructed that our task is to "make sense" of Alex and the group, but we are simultaneously, and by the very same ironic gesture, put on notice that the project of making such sense involves our own active retrospective projection, so that the film's diegesis is effectively from the start only an after-effect of this projection. After all, while we ridicule the minister and privilege the perspective of Alex's "true" friends, our situation is in fact the minister's own. Moreover, the suicide implies that even Alex's true friends had only mimed a knowledge of him. As Nick, the former radio therapist, caustically remarks, this gap in our knowledge does not concern some existential abyss of Alex's psychic agony. Rather, it concerns precisely coherence as the contingent and provisional effect of a struggle, one that fails to appear in its properly comic dimension only when it succeeds in seeming to proceed on the basis of true knowledge.

Alex's failure consequently models the aporia of the distinctively late-modern mode of subjectivity, if we accept Giddens's account of reflexive modernity as involving the active structuring of personal "lifestyle" across a pre-constituted lifespan. The definitive challenge in this model is reconciling one's own responsibility for constructing coherence on the basis of publicly circulating expert knowledges with the presumption that only spontaneous coherence originating in the intimate self is permitted to indicate authenticity. In this sense, Alex is the subject who fails to become modern—that is, the structurally missing "failed" or transitional subject who must be imaginatively posited if the true late-modern subject is to emerge. Alex's failure of narrativity is not directly a failure to achieve coherence; it indicates a peculiar form of subjective legitimation crisis—an *incapacity to misperceive* the extimate content of intimate subjectivity as his own, which would permit coherence to appear authentic or self-consistent. The unaccountable series of seemingly random occupations suggests compulsive repetition of an effort to exercise authentic agency, which must only have repeated the appearance of being staged by him. In short, he felt like a fake.

This analysis is vindicated by the way Nick comes to assume Alex's place, marking the passage—and its consequences—to fully modern reflexive subjectivity. Like Alex, Nick is cynical, in part, insofar as he also feels like a fake; this is the reason he gives for having quit his radio show. It is thus no coincidence that Nick enters the narrative as the impotent voice of therapeutic self-deception, of the (literally) self-canceling "how-to" project of reflexive self-fashioning and the disavowal of, on the one hand, unconscious motivations (radio therapy presupposes the rational self-transparency

posited by liberalism) and, on the other hand, the irrelevance of ideology (as a mode of liberal discourse, functionalist psychology determines the individual as a self-transparent agent). Nick is also the sole member of the group who explicitly understands their common history in terms of disillusionment and "selling out." His cynicism is to be contrasted with Michael's compulsive rationalizations and Sam's narcissism, and *it is this cynicism that the narrative functions to displace*. Nick is the only character whose subjective stance turns into its opposite; he embodies the overcoming of liberalism's immanent critique. If the youth politics of the Sixties measure democracy's distance from its own avowed goals of equality and freedom, surrendering the struggle for them is a betrayal of liberal-democratic citizenship itself. This is the disavowed potency of Nick's cynicism: in resenting this surrender, he vacillates between indicting his own generation and expressing skepticism about the very possibility of success in such a struggle. Given all this, doesn't his transformation redeem political hope? No: Nick surrenders his cynicism in favor of a thoroughly depoliticized form of sociality, perversely figured by his de-sexualized monogamous bond with the infantile future citizen, Chloe.[46] His newfound willingness to engage is to apply only to *personal* self-fashioning, explicitly sited on a private estate in a space sundered from politics, history, and even strangers—and juridically secured through Harold's utilitarian friendship with retrograde members of the local police force.[47]

Thus, unlike Alex, Nick finds a way to delude himself through the necessary detour of friendship, which will now function to disguise the extimate sources of his intimate self. Put another way, what we can project as having kept Alex from transitioning into reflexive modernity and its attendant modes of subjectivity and politics is his naïve investment—once shared, but, as we have seen, abandoned by Meg—in the community and the state as the proper addressees of political litigation. Alex thought direct engagement in collective struggle could challenge and transform conditions of injustice; he was, in Giddens's terms, an emancipator. The tragedy of his subjective legitimation crisis stems from his investment in a defunct—as Nick knows—standard of authenticity. Hence his fatal sense of guilt (which can now be grasped as correlative to Meg's). Reflexive subjectivity demands consistency with personally selected criteria; it does not presuppose the authenticity of the criteria themselves. This was the error haunting Nick during his days as a radio therapist, the reason radio therapy appeared fake and repugnant to him. Unlike Alex, Nick effectively learns that his criteria of authenticity had been misplaced when Chloe tells him that, despite—or perhaps because of—the generic publicness of his advice, he had "helped" her in their pseudo-intimate encounter reflexively mediated by broadcast technology and therapeutic jargon.[48]

The fact that late-modern authenticity is grounded in extimate, impersonal, mass-mediated expertise does not suffice to render it inoperative, since the subject concerns itself only with its own capacity to set in motion the life narrative it has constructed for itself. Chloe's emphatically thematized youth and apparent shallowness decisively place her within a generation for which these new rules are self-evident. Her attractiveness to Alex, Michael, and Nick derives less from the fact that she is unencumbered by history and more from the fact that history itself is no longer, for

her, an index of depth or authenticity. Alex is unable to accomplish what Nick does—to subjectivize Chloe's rules of sociality.

In the process by which Nick comes to appropriate Alex's place, friendship plays a pivotal role as the metaphorical vehicle of, precisely, displacement. If, following Jasinksi, "helping" displaces "saving," this displacement absolutely does not suggest a way out of the socialization of politics. On the contrary, "helping" is here an index of this socialization, insofar as helping one's friend takes the place of structural change or collective social action, both of which are assumed in advance to be impossible. But the point not to be missed is that this is not a choice made by the subject; we are not, after all, dealing with a straightforward case of "selling out." Rather, we are faced here precisely with the displacement of the proper locus of political agency, such that it simply no longer makes any sense to speak the language of emancipation. Such speech lacks a proper addressee. Consequently, the lesson learned by Harold and Nick is not only the right one, but is in fact prefigured as the cardinal development of the transition to reflexive socialization of politics. Ultimately, it is this prefiguration—this reflexive appropriation of the projected "lifespan" of the film—that is itself figured in the eulogy address. This, in turn, means that if there is more political agency within the space of friendship than Arendt allows (inasmuch as friendship is much more than simply a reservoir of future political possibility), there is also less (inasmuch as the promise of this future is fanciful). The two are yoked as two sides of one ideological coin: friendship is the new site of the political precisely insofar as we are in a post-political or pseudo-political universe.

It is ultimately in this sense that *The Big Chill* concerns the *proper location of politics* in liberal late modernity, and as such displays the tensions and contradictions implicit in this problematic. Is the strategy of situating politics at the micro level as an emergent possibility within friendship an adequate answer to the Arendtian critique? To neoliberal personalization of political responsibility? To the leftist critique of privatization? Are we to read the film as taking one or another position within the range prescribed by critiques of liberalism, or are we to see it as registering the impasses that occasion such critiques? The film is ambivalent despite its proto-utopian conclusion, which strives to highlight what Jasinski calls a politics of *philia*—characterized by the introduction of a certain reflective distance into intimate attachments—by retaining a distinctly liberal conception of subjectivity and sociality.[49] This emphasis on a minimum of separation is all that would distinguish the film's model of politics from the standard liberal gesture of depoliticization through friendship. Precisely because it is a gesture of political hope that depends on endorsing the liberal model, it would be prudent to dismiss it as belonging to liberalism's ideological ambit. Still, given the various post-structuralist accounts of late capitalist ideology, the notion of micropolitics seems to be among a very small number of possible forms of resistance to what appears as an inexorable socialization of politics. If liberalism is the reigning ideology, it is because, in order to reduce to the absolute minimum the prospect of organized resistance to the logic of capital, it has largely succeeded in depriving "the political" of anything like a "proper" domain. *The Big Chill*'s modest proposal, despite its

complicity with liberal logic, at least purports to insist on a certain irreducible political dimension available even in the heart of private affectivity. If this dimension remains ideological within the film, it is because too much has been granted to liberalism in it. Hence the need for the sort of critical defense offered by Jasinski. The film's micropolitics is surely doomed, but it is for this very reason that the film is of interest.

Conclusion: Friendship as (A)Political Community

I have been arguing that *The Big Chill* (re)positions *philia* in relation to Arendt's private/public distinction so as to re-inscribe, in the very mode of communitarian critique, the logic governing liberal citizenship. Moreover, a certain tendentious misreading of Arendt in relation to film turns out to be the effect of the film's rhetorical strategy, itself structured in its very logic and form by a specific ideological procedure characteristic of liberal late modernity. Accordingly, the republicanism the film proffers turns out to presuppose liberalism for its own discourse to attain minimal coherence: the assertion that friendship can reinvigorate the political within "the social" depends on the continuing, untroubled hegemony of capitalist logic and its attendant forms of sociability. The film's emphasis on "(re)constituting community" ultimately privileges social bonds in a way that effectively renders politics itself as a kind of instrumental supplement, useful primarily for sustaining communal life. The "friends" who are to develop faculties of judgment remain liberal subjects engaged in contractual relations with one another, outside any wider polity and without purchase on the institutions of either the state or capital. Indeed, even to register as a heuristic allegory of citizenship, their *friendship depends* on this abdication. It thus becomes evident that, far from *lacking* a civic bond because it privatizes politics, liberalism actively develops a mode of sociality aimed at *suspending politics* as such. The fantasy of extrapolitical private life sustains the "actual" mode of liberal political subjectivity and sociality.

At stake in *The Big Chill*, then, is a fundamental contradiction of liberal citizenship and sociality. At a certain moment, the delusion can no longer be sustained that it is possible both to maintain bourgeois social relations and to engage in forms of critical citizenship that challenge the logic governing these relations. Yet, in a stunning reversal, the politics of intimacy whose failure has become evident in its (non)encounter with structural political problems, rather than being supplanted by more robust and thoroughgoing institutional engagement and critique, is used precisely to *reject* just this kind of engagement as *itself* a product of personal blindness. Thus where Arendt worries about the loss of *public space*, the film foregrounds concern regarding the loss of *individual autonomy* as the salient political threat countered by *philia*. To be sure, autonomy is critical to the maintenance of a public world; however, the gesture of construing the problem as one of balancing autonomy and community consigns *philia* to the private sphere, so that even as individuals cultivate the capacity for judgment, they do so not as citizens but as members of an affective, rather than political, community. By transferring the

obligation to act to the sphere of the private and familial (and it is no accident that all the negotiations concerning intimacy in the film revolve around questions of family and parenthood, rather than, say, recreational sexuality), the film can side with "action" while guaranteeing that its *public* effects will be indistinguishable from "complacency" or "political resignation." In sum, the faculty of "judgment" Jasinski identifies as the narrative's key heuristic serves to *distort* the field in which it appears to intervene, in the sense that it masquerades as a model of political efficacy in order to render politics superfluous.

The Big Chill thus demonstrates that the Arendtian effort to segregate a privileged realm of the authentically political is the ideologically presupposed obverse of liberalism's definitive ruse. The confounding and confounded space of "the social" appears both to Arendt and to liberal subjects as the result of a loss for precisely the same reason. For Arendt, what is lost is the freedom found in politics; for liberal subjects, it is the freedom found in private authenticity. In both its aspects, this loss is an ideological projection produced by the gesture of segregation: the will to "partition" (as Jacques Rancière puts it)[50] is the will to evict the antagonism constitutive of politics. This effort to exclude political antagonism from the start can today only reinforce the liberal logic Arendt aims to challenge. The liberal imaginary constitutes itself by projecting a loss of authentic private affectivity, modeled by friendship, precisely in order to institute the liberal partition as the means of restoring this utopia. This promise, in turn, sustains "the social" as the space of its forever deferred fulfillment. Arendt apprehends this space as a loss of politics, not recognizing that, far from being a side-effect of modernity, the (re)production of this "loss" constitutes the liberal project. In short, "the social" *is* the liberal politics of depoliticization. The wish to "restore" the public-private partition not only posits as empirical a purely imaginary loss, it also repeats, in the very form of critique, the ideological gesture of extricating the political dimension from the space of its most direct salience.

Notes

[1] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Palo Alto: Stanford, 1991), 209–31.

[2] For example, see Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000).

[3] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3–29.

[4] On the one hand, in order to register as historically novel and more democratic, radically reflexive politics must explicitly differentiate itself from the "older," more naïve or insidiously oppressive form. On the other hand, this disavowal, according to which nothing (of value) is surrendered, is experienced as deprivation.

[5] A survey of the relevant literature would be interminable, but would surely include Marx's analysis of the ideological saturation of social relations; Habermas's analysis of the transformation of the public sphere; Arendt's critique of "the social"; Rancière's excoriation of political theory's effort to "police" the political; feminist efforts to rethink the public/private distinction; various and multiplying accounts of micropolitics; the "culturalization"

thesis derived from the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham Center for Critical Cultural Studies; and an expansive literature on modern liberal "displacement(s)" of politics.

[6] The list of noteworthy others is quite short but includes *Grand Canyon* (Kasdan's quasi-sequel to *The Big Chill*), *1969*, *Small Circle of Friends*, *American Graffiti*, *Flashback*, and *Forrest Gump*.

[7] For example, Vincent Canby writes, "'The Big Chill' is a somewhat fancy variation on John Sayles's 'Return of the Secaucus Seven,'" while Cynthia Rose observes that "[a] direct line can be traced from [*Secaucus 7*'s] script to Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill*." Vincent Canby, "*The Big Chill*, Reunion of 60's Activists," *New York Times*, September 23, 1983; Cynthia Rose, "The Art of Saylesmanship," *The Guardian*, 1990. Derek Nystrom of *The City Pages* aptly conveys the consensus view that *The Return of the Secaucus 7* is "[b]est known as the movie that *The Big Chill* ripped off." http://www.citypages.com/movies/detail.asp?MID = 4223.

[8] Timothy Noah ("The Big Massage," *Washington Monthly*, February, 1984 39–44) and Pat Aufderheide ("The Way We Were," *In These Times* 7 [38] (1983): 15–6) are emblematic of leftist criticism, while Isidor Silver ably stands in for the right ("Big Chill, Big Deal," *Society* 21 [March/April 1984]: 90–1).

[9] James Jasinski, "(Re)Constituting Community through Narrative Argument: *Eros* and *Philia* in *The Big Chill*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 467.

[10] E.g., Benjamin DeMott, *The Trouble with Friendship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[11] For a rich, systematic, and sympathetic account of the emergence of this hierarchy, see Allan Silver "'Two Different Sorts of Commerce'—Friendship and Strangeship in Civil Society," in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice*, ed. Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[12] Fredric Jameson, "The Vanishing Mediator or, Max Weber as Storyteller," *The Ideologies of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), vol. 2, 3–34.

[13] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Though Giddens's account functions heuristically here, it is later complicated by the suggestion that the very transition from emancipatory to life politics comes into view only from the perspective of late modern liberal culture. Emancipatory politics is posited as a presupposition of fully individualized life politics, so that if it is apprehended as collective struggle, this collectivity is not opposed to, but rather conditions, later forms of "private" citizenship. Giddens should not be (mis)read as endorsing, for example, an account of the shift from the polis to the liberal welfare state or from authentic community to narcissistic atomism.

[14] Jasinski, 467.

[15] Jasinski, 467.

[16] Jasinski, 470 (my emphasis).

[17] Jasinski, 468.

[18] Arendt's conception of politics is both exquisitely elaborated and notoriously difficult to pin down. Simply put, commentators continue to disagree as to what "counts" as politics for her, given that the examples she offers are frequently at odds with one another, as well as with her descriptive accounts and normative pronouncements. Lisa Disch usefully distinguishes between readings advancing either "agonal" or "associative" interpretations of Arendt. While Jasinski seems to fall within the latter camp, Disch's thesis is that among Arendt's central concerns was cross-contaminating the two in order to curb the latent narcissism of the former and the oppressive majoritarianism of the latter: "Where the agonistic reading celebrates differentiation and plurality over publicity [which, according to Disch, is *the* criterion of politics for Arendt], the associative reading emphasizes public consensus over contestation and difference . . . at the cost of domesticating the public space by reinstating the norm of mutual understanding"; Lisa Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*

(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 87. Taking issue with both interpretive strategies, Disch argues that "Arendt makes solidarity conditional on publicity" (89). In other words, the "associative" dimension of Arendtian politics presupposes and derives its character from the principle of plurality, which in turn is not reducible to "agonism" but indicates the status of reality as an irreducibly social artifact. Among the consequences flowing from such an interpretation is a radical transformation of the concept of "action," which now becomes social through and through, to the point of decentering the locus of agency from a subject to the social process of reception, interpretation, and (re)production.

[19] Jasinski, 469.

[20] Jasinski, 470.

[21] Jasinski, 483.

[22] "Liberalism" is far from univocal, and the term can simultaneously and ambiguously refer to several sometimes divergent strands of political theory, a set of institutional and juridical arrangements, and what Anne Norton describes as "the common sense of the American people, a set of principles unconsciously adhered to, a set of conventions so deeply held that they appear (when they appear at all) to be no more than common sense"; Anne Norton, *Republic of Signs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1. In Marxian terms, Norton's is a description of ideology, a term some recent theorists, in an effort to disown some of its unwieldy epistemological and polemical baggage while retaining the sense of the collective imaginary mediation of reality, have supplanted with "social imaginary." See, for example, Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998); John Thompson, "Ideology and the Social Imaginary: An Appraisal of Castoriadis and Lefort," *Theory and Society* 11; John Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Benjamin Lee, eds., *New Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

Consequently, a "characteristically liberal" feature is, here, one which has been "vindicated" by history by becoming *doxa* (though it may in fact have appeared in theoretical accounts only after emerging historically). Theorists may differ, as, say, Locke and Mill emphatically do, concerning the precise meaning and institutional implications of "liberty," yet the notion remains constitutive for liberal theory, public discourse, and quotidian practice. Grasping what "liberty" effectively means today entails triangulating among these sites and the traffic between them, which therefore together comprise what I am calling the liberal social imaginary. Such is the case, too, for the very notion of "politics," since liberal theory and practice commence with the effort and constitute the project of producing a radically new partition of social life, one in which a new zone of privacy is to emerge in contradistinction to the market and the state from which it is to be defended. What all liberal theorists share, irrespective of what may otherwise be irreconcilable differences among them, is the commitment to found the public political order on the basis of consensual relations among at least notionally "private" individuals, a commitment which has, in fact, become inextricable "common sense." Insofar as this project is inherently contradictory, the proper locus of politics has remained a constitutive liberal concern which is reflected in, but by no means restricted to, theoretical debates. A pivotal feature of liberal cultural logic, then, is the establishment, policing, and continual renegotiation of an imaginary frontier between the private self girded by its affective attachments and the impersonal, "alienating" demands of the market and the state.

[23] Jasinski, 472.

[24] Jasinski, 475.

[25] The allegorical reading of the film relies on the fact that Harold's faculty of judgment evolves throughout the narrative, so that it may seem unjust to hold him responsible for repugnant judgments made early on. Yet there is never any diegetic indication that Harold comes to revise this particular judgment. Moreover, the scene functions quite systematically to

dissipate the guilt which, though voiced by Meg, is clearly attributable to the group as a whole—as well as, if we are speaking allegorically, the cohort for which it stands. The origins, character, and implications of this guilt are complex and controversial, and a reading arguing that the film advises abandoning the polemical exploration of this guilt in favor of a trans-political search for optimal communal norms effectively accepts the thoroughly ideological notion that nothing relevant to the practice of citizenship can be learned from either this guilt or from the polemics surrounding it. The "allegorical" shift of emphasis from political guilt to the cultivation of judgment, construed as a "faculty" and cultivated among friends, is itself eminently polemical.

[26] In fact, the notion of "action" is inadequate here, for the demand imposed upon the "authentic" subject is to *emit signs* of authenticity, where action is only one way of doing so.

[27] The systematically uneven distribution of power within a society such as ours poses what may be an insurmountable challenge to Arendt's politics of plurality. While the latter notion is meant to indicate the irreducibly social or intersubjective character of reality by emphasizing the heterogeneous variety of perspectives constitutive of the "web of relationships" making up what Arendt calls "the world," it fails to take into account the way in which power overdetermines the very field of heterogeneity. In other words, one of Marx's basic lessons concerning ideology is that not all differences of perspective or ways of being socially situated are equivalent, since some differences exercise decisive influence over what all the others will mean. It does not suffice, then, to acknowledge the situatedness of each perspective; it is also necessary to grant that some perspectives structure both the character and the salience of the others in advance. Once this is understood, democratic politics can no longer simply strive reflexively to thematize plurality; if it is to remain democratic, it must commit itself to dislodging ideological overdetermination. One of the main obstacles to such a project is that it would entail what would be experienced as the destruction—rather than valorization—of the very plural perspectives whose character is inextricably linked to the undemocratic cunning of ideological distortion. From this perspective, Arendt's poignant call to reinvent collective agency in the modern world is both tantalizingly close and infinitely removed from Marx's own revolutionary project. They agree on everything but the essentials. Moreover, the contour of this particular dilemma changes only marginally in light of "post-metaphysical" accounts of power that dispense with the notion of ideological overdetermination. Even once it is granted that no single structural feature (e.g., relations of production) can explain the power dynamics shaping a historical conjuncture, it remains the case that the dramatic differences in the agentive capacities of various social actors cannot be understood as arbitrary or idiosyncratic differences of perspective but indicate the operation of systematic and obdurate—if incoherent or incompatible—logics in "the imaginary institution of society."

[28] The feeling of guilt at once masks and betokens a range of ultimately impersonal political phenomena. The political effect of guilt is that it produces evasive strategies; its analytic usefulness is that it marks the site where the political and the personal actually intersect. Simply put, the Sixties generation had nothing to be guilty about: on the one hand, many of its projects met with considerable success; on the other hand, if these successes did not amount to a wholesale transformation in the relations of power, this is not because of failures attributable to particular persons or groups. The very fact that this nonoccurrence of revolution came to be experienced subjectively and collectively as a failure meriting guilt betokens the cunning of the liberal logic that facilitated shifting the ground of political engagement in first place.

[29] Even if it were possible to secure the claim that by the film's conclusion Harold adequately embodies Arendtian judgment, it remains the case that Arendt's model of judgment in light of what she calls "plurality"—the model exemplified, not simply analogized, by friendship—fails to take into account the possibility that plurality is itself always already overdetermined by systematically unequal relations of power and/or ideological "distortion."

From this perspective, the confusion, ambivalence, and downright incoherence everywhere marking her account—effaced in Jasinski's version of it—is the product of a basic ruse of liberal social logic. In effect, *friendship is paradigmatic of the form capitalist depoliticization takes*, so that if we are to turn friendship into a means of re-politicization, this can transpire only if and when the "faculty" and practice of judgment is radically socialized—conceived as operating at the level of the collectivity and directed not at members of the polity but toward the conditions structuring the polity as such. In fact, Arendt can be read as advocating something like this step (cf. Disch) in her recommendation of "storytelling." Yet because she tends to denigrate and renounce, rather than learn from, liberal/capitalist (or "modern") "alienation" of agency, her efforts to imagine its restoration remain internally inconsistent. Once again, the "reflexivity thesis" is a useful foil here: where Arendt argues that alienation of agency in "the social" entails the misguided surrender of reflexive control over "political facts," Beck and Giddens demonstrate that, on the contrary, late modern "alienation" is an effect of reflexivity itself, so that what causes political helplessness is the very effort to direct social life on the basis of what we learn about it. That is, even collective, multiperspectival judgment cannot produce, and in fact inhibits, the transparency of "political facts" presupposed by Arendtian politics.

Relatedly, her view that the heterogeneity of perspectives on the world, while entailing disagreement, testifies to the commonality of that world (without implying anything determinate about its attributes), does not admit of the possibility that, for example, Harold and the "scum" effectively live in *different* worlds. That is, ideological overdetermination means that some perspectives enjoy the status of self-evident fact while others appear illegitimate, disingenuous, perverse, antisocial, pathological, incoherent, or simply illegible, so that it is either irrational or downright impossible to entertain them as instances of plurality. Among the resulting differences is that Harold's early judgment, while ill-advised and in principle open to revision, is permitted to appear in the guise of a communicative act subject to interpretation and contestation, while the scum are from the start burdened by the self-evident fact that they have failed to engage in similarly legible communicative practices. Their criminal acts can charitably be described as un-civil yet political disobedience, but for this very reason are inadequate as civic practices. Whatever perspective on the world such acts encode must be disarticulated from the acts themselves and given exclusively linguistic form. Of course, the burden of qualifying for inclusion in this sort of political activity rests entirely on those whose criminality is an artifact, at least in part, of their exclusion.

[30] In a peculiar sense, Harold is quite right: neither Meg nor any of the friends is guilty of any personal lapse. Their guilt has an enigmatic character insofar as it gives psychic form to a thoroughly impersonal phenomenon—the re-signification of politics itself. If Meg and the others took steps inconsistent with their political commitments, it was because the ground shifted beneath their feet, as it were. Thus, for example, it must have become impossible for Meg to generate a rationale—a "story," in Arendt's parlance—according to which continuing her work with the "scum" still had a meaningful political dimension. From this perspective, her sense of guilt is misplaced: she experiences as a personal failure of political imagination her acceptance of a forced bargain in which no real alternative ever existed. The experience to which Meg's guilt testifies is therefore precisely the experience of alienation decried by Arendt. Yet it is an experience that appears only obliquely in the film, in a scene which actively endorses the notion that guilt is misplaced, while simultaneously—and by the same, highly condensed rhetorical token—discouraging any investigation of this guilt's actual genesis. Meg is acquitted not because a structural transformation made what had seemed like political agency magically disappear, but because she had been mistaken all along.

[31] This is one of Arendt's chief complaints regarding the "rule of no one" characteristic of "the social"—what Tocqueville calls the "benign despotism" to which American—that is, liberal—democracy is prone. Implicit in this complaint is the "agonistic" Arendt, for whom politics is not confined to negotiation over communal norms but presupposes irreducible

differences no set of norms can finally mediate. It is only on condition of this irreducibility that action, power, and a durable public world are possible at all. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

[32] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Prometheus, 2000).

[33] Significantly, the lesson Harold learns when Nick rejects his offer and Sarah upbraids him for this misguided act of generosity has nothing to do with the political implications—however bourgeois—of the juridico-economic trespass involved. Rather, it concerns the breach of Nick's autonomy and the risk to the merger itself. That is, Harold's error consists in pursuing what could become a self-defeating course of action; it is a pragmatic miscalculation, not an ethico-political one.

[34] See Lisa J. Disch "On Friendship in 'Dark Times,'" in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 285–312.

[35] Though Karen has a different instance of symmetry in mind, her comment applies equally well here.

[36] This is not to say Sarah does not feel goodwill toward Meg. On the contrary, Sarah's love for Meg is precisely the alibi securing her misrecognition of her own motives.

[37] Though the term was famously coined by Oneida commune founder John Humphrey Noyes, as a lay philosophy and political project of the Sixties counterculture, the doctrine of "free love" derives from interpretations of Freud by such figures as Herbert Marcuse and, notably, Wilhelm Reich. In *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Governing Character Structure* (completed around 1930 but appearing for the first time in English in 1945) and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), Reich took Freud's account of the libidinal structuration of the psyche to indicate that the behavioral norms expressed in moral strictures and social institutions presuppose the repression of an otherwise spontaneous sexuality. A Communist until his expulsion from the German Party in 1933, Reich argued that the capitalist structures that produced, and were reproduced by, bourgeois morality constituted an ongoing threat to psychic and social health and psychic freedom. Bourgeois sexual repression produced widespread neurosis, and true revolutionary emancipation could be achieved through the cultivation of an active, guilt-free sex life. Pursuit of sexual pleasure outside the confines of bourgeois norms would result in the dismantling of the socioeconomic structures which relied on the sublimation of libidinal drives. If Reich is a father of the Sixties' "sexual revolution," it is in this, explicitly political sense. Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Governing Character Structure* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971); Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980).

[38] The silent interlocutor evoked by the effort to sharpen the distinction between Eros and *philia* is Herbert Marcuse, perhaps the most prominent theorist and a vocal advocate of the "new social movements" of the Sixties. It was Marcuse who identified the peculiar form of libidinal blackmail by means of which "total administration" came to assume the form of apparently total personal freedom. The key to "one-dimensional" or post-dialectical society is the advent of "repressive desublimation," or the gradual removal of various prohibitions aimed not at liberating the individual but at enslaving her all the more effectively. See Hebert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), and *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

[39] Notable here is the homology between the ideologically deceptive desire to experience "pure" pleasure in the absence of a supporting "perverse" substrate and the desire to experience a "pure" relationship untinged by "pathological" cathexis. Both are dialectical responses to an ideological constraint which they only reproduce, since the very promise of purity generates the desire it proposes to fulfill.

[40] Silver "'Two Different Sorts of Commerce'—Friendship and Strangeship in Civil Society."

[41] See Lauren Berlant, "The Theory of Infantile Citizenship," in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Raleigh: Duke, 1994).

[42] "Objective" is, for Marx, not a positivist category but rather the designation of the way certain features (say, of the commodity) actually or effectively appear to subjects even when the subjects do not think that these features appear this way. This form of objectivity has a structure homologous to that of Arendt's "world," which we cannot directly locate "out there" but which also is not reducible to our own subjective fantasy or illusion.

[43] Jasinski, 478.

[44] See Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997).

[45] James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). The reference is Jasinski's, 467.

[46] Berlant, "Infantile Citizenship."

[47] When Harold haughtily defends this friendship by insisting that the cop "happens to be one heck of a guy," his warrant for this claim is that "he's twice kept this house from being ripped off." Nothing in the film more clearly evinces the logic of "selling out": here is a cynical pseudo-friendship rationalized as necessary to protect one's private property from "scum." It is a textbook example of bourgeois ideology as Marx described it, from the subjective investment in property sustained by the distorting capitalist system of incentives, through its self-deluding rationalization and the endorsement of anti-democratic state policies, all the way to the paradoxical consequences—the debasement of the very forms of sociability supposed to be secured by private autonomy founded on property. The cop appears to be a friend only insofar as both he and Harold are entangled in a system of relations distorted by capital. Yet even within this system both sense their unsurpassable mutual alienation, an alienation bound to push them toward hysterical over-investment in the system that creates it: Harold comes to see the underclass as "scum" and financial success as responsible social membership; the cop develops paranoia toward strangers and a naïve identification with television detective-heroes.

[48] For a discussion of mediated intimacy-at-a-distance, see John Thompson, *Political Scandal* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 39–40.

[49] At issue here is the problem of distance within intimacy. As Arendt imagines the intercession of "the world" formed by the friendship relation into this intimate space, this raises the question of the always already mediated (linguistically, socially, ideologically, juridically, etc.) nature of any intimacy—as well as the equally pressing question of mass-mediation posed by the reflexivity thesis (Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000); Beck; Giddens). That is, when Arendt imagines restoring distance to a space that appears to lack it—and thereby fails to achieve the spaciousness (openness, publicness, etc.) proper to it—she is asserting a counterfactual model of intimacy as it exists in the modern world she critiques. The erotic(ized) closure of intimacy is itself a (late- or post-) modern *fantasy*, sustained by the mediatized "in-between" as a promise of its own collapse.

This, in turn, brings us to the numerous (re)markings of mediation within the filmic diegesis: Michael, the writer for *People* magazine (we might linger briefly over the apt choice of *People*, a "respectable" gossip rag vaguely appropriating the visual rhetoric of news weeklies and named for the indeterminate mass subject to which it is devoted and to whom it addresses itself—the "people" it is about and the "people" who read it: a more perfect emblem of the reflexive circuit of modern mediated stranger sociability could not have been adduced) has even reflected in print about his friend, Alex; Sam, the actor whose image as fictional detective circulates on TV and in magazines, is thereby able to mediate a juridical conflict between Nick and a diegetically real policeman into a sociable relation; Nick, the former radio therapist, is disgusted with the misprision of stranger sociability in the context of (already reflexively staged) psychotherapeutic intimacy; the repeated use of the video camera as a diegetic device for staging self-consciously ironized confessions; Sarah's comparison of Harold to the fictional TV character John Beresford Tipton; and even the very genesis of political disappointment. When Meg reflects on her disillusionment with the

"scum" she once defended in court, the very possibility of this disillusionment is a function of the source of her initial political motivation—mass-mediated images and narratives of social injustice and its victims. No wonder that when asked if she thought she'd be defending Grumpy and Sneezy, Sam jumps in with "No—Huey and Bobby." These names indicate not only the political nature of the group's erstwhile orientation but also the mediated nature of their political imaginary. The latter can be glossed by citing two first names as if they are brand logos on a conceptual par with fictional characters—which, of course, they are.

[50] Jacques Rancère, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event* 5, Issue 3.