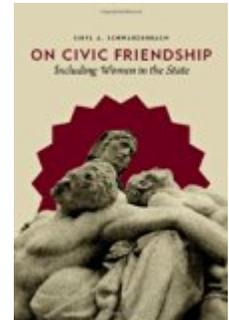


Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach. *On Civic Friendship: Including Women in the State.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. xiv + 341 pp. \$29.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-14723-1.



Reviewed by Lynne Curry

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Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep (San Francisco State University)

In *On Civic Friendship*, Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach engages the reader in an extended exploration of the question, "what holds a good and just society together?" (p. 1). The question seems a particularly urgent one if the reader accepts the author's stark premise that the United States is a democracy in steep decline, a society in which "loyalty and goodness—even justice itself—are frequently laughed at in the face of the almighty dollar, commercial success, or the fame afforded by the wielding of brute power" (p. xi). Schwarzenbach's remedy for this gloomy state of affairs is to resuscitate Aristotle's concept of *philia*, or friendship among citizens. A shared commitment to *philia* is essential to the very survival of democracy. It entails, according to the author, "the awareness of reciprocity, the need for self-limitation in the face of the other, and even the concept of duty itself" (p. xi.) But Aristotle and his successors neglected to think through how the actual work of inculcating and sustaining civic friendships would be carried out—and by whom. This "forgotten category of ethical reproduction," she argues,

has in fact fallen to women, who have performed their roles as caregivers largely outside of the public arena and thus beyond the concern of Western philosophical and political discourse. But it is in the traditional women's work of *caring* that Schwarzenbach sees nothing less than the radical potential to reconceptualize the modern state, saving democracy by restoring civic friendship to its essential place as a fundamental, shared political value. If John Locke claimed that a man owns resources by mixing them with his labor, Schwarzenbach counters with the "commonsense precept that things belong to those who *care* for them" (p. 18).

The book is structured in two main sections, "The Past" (chapters 2 through 4) and "The Present" (chapters 5 through 8). Part 1 takes the reader on a breathtaking intellectual ride, starting at democracy's philosophical foundations in ancient Greece, propelling forward through Locke's labor theory of value, and cruising through Karl Marx's critiques and "the socialist turn." Schwarzenbach argues that, as theories evolved

stressing the "shared male experiences" of property ownership, productive economic activities, and individual rights, the fundamental Aristotelian notion of civic friendship got lost (p. 17). Western political theory became entrenched in a public/private bifurcation that precluded a serious and sustained discussion of the centrality of caring to the healthy functioning of a democracy. The work of caring became an ostensibly apolitical, largely feminized, domestic realm that primarily connoted child rearing. "To care" was also regarded as a "mere" emotion and thus supposedly antithetical to the enlightened reason required to operate in the (mostly male) political sphere. But, Schwarzenbach argues, getting intellectually bogged down in such a metaphor has resulted in a dire inability of modern states to find solutions to the problem of our moribund democracy today. She offers a way out by reconceiving "our essential rights and duties in order now to include—even temporarily favor, considering its abandonment and neglect—ethical reproduction" (p. 136). In part 2, the author elaborates on her model and then draws on feminist theory to both retrace the constitutional history of the United States and to extend the new model of civic friendship beyond national borders.

Schwarzenbach, a philosopher, is most compelling when she guides the reader through her synthesis and critique of political theory and presents her case that civic friendship and caring are necessary preconditions for justice, security, and individual rights to thrive. The continued functioning of the state, she reminds us, *requires* "mutual good will and trust (including the interest citizens have in one another's character), a reciprocal wishing of fellow citizens well for their own sake, as well as a practical doing of things for them" (p. 23). Nor can justice survive if citizens do not perceive themselves to be moral equals; without civic friendship, "justice becomes nothing more than the imposition of the interests of the stronger" (p. 55). Her argument culminates in the unnerving conclusion that the American reaction

to the September 11 terrorist attacks has been the opposite of an enlightened and reasonable response: the United States has been engaged in a protracted war on terror (an emotion) that has only wrought "greater worldwide fear, rage, and terror and in particular an enhanced global distrust of and contempt for *itself*" (p. 285). There is an urgent need, she argues, to take the task of ethical reproduction seriously, and to construct institutions that encourage collectively reasonable emotions (such as trust and friendship) and minimize irrational and destructive ones (such as fear and hatred). Seen in this way, the work of ethical reproduction becomes an eminently rational enterprise (p. 114).

Schwarzenbach is less convincing in her examination of history through the theoretical paradigm she so carefully constructs. Her discussion actually stops at Reconstruction, and thus engages not at all with the emergence of the American welfare state during the Progressive Era and the New Deal, also periods of dramatic change, searing inequalities, and profound instability—but times nevertheless enriched by lively discourses about the meanings of citizenship and democracy, and about what Americans did and did not owe each other. Most relevantly for Schwarzenbach, the Progressive Era witnessed a powerful "maternalist" movement whose adherents asserted a new public dimension of women's traditional roles as caregivers. I was also less taken by chapter 7's discussion of the state of feminist theory. Schwarzenbach correctly points out the political dangers of essentializing women exclusively as mothers, which could render them to the margins of politics and the economy. But, absent a clearly gender-based discourse to validate their efforts, it remains somewhat unclear why modern American women, who are of diverse backgrounds and interests, would feel a particular need to unite with each other and take upon themselves the onus of remaking democracy on the basis of their historical roles as caregivers. Ultimately, given the vivid picture Schwarzenbach paints of the United

States in decline, her conclusion urging an unspecified "women's movement" to somehow make the restoration of civic friendship an "explicit demand" offered me less comfort than I wish it had (p. 288).

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