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The left and freedom

Neoliberals have made the term ‘freedom’ a hollowed-out concept. The democratic left must breathe new life into it

‘Freedom’ is back as a slogan but often in a very peculiar way. It has become a distorted term whose hollowness is all too obvious.

Neoliberals have for decades been reducing the concept to mere ‘economic’ freedom, their worldview one in which individuals exist only as isolated atoms, each looking out for their own self-interest in antagonism to one another. ‘Freedom’ then paradoxically becomes the right of the strongest to prevail in a Hobbesian war of all against all.

Call it ‘anarcho-conservatism’: this simple-minded libertarianism is quite common among today‘s radicalised figures on the right. Even at the height of the pandemic, radical right-wingers, esoteric minds and sundry other critics of the public-health measures presented themselves as fighters for ‘freedom’, as if that meant unrestrained egocentricity.

Different ways of interpretation

At the turn of the year, two German writers hence declared ‘freedom’ to be the meaningless ‘phrase of the year’ in 2022 — although this triggered uproar: how could one degrade such a basic value of democratic civilisation to a ‘phrase’? Occasionally, Karl Marx was quoted as saying that ‘no man fights against freedom; he fights at most against the freedom of others.’ Marx meant that what masquerades as advocacy of freedom, in general, is often nothing more than the desire for privilege at the expense of others.

If it is grotesque when radical right-wingers parade this slogan — their political family having regularly trampled on freedom historically — it is just as dubious when some left-wingers dismiss ‘bourgeois’ freedom as ideology, a deceptive manoeuvre. ‘What good is freedom of the press to an illiterate? What use is the right to vote to the starving?’ asked Oskar Lafontaine, former leader of the German Left party. He thus encapsulated a not-uncommon claim: all these democratic freedoms are

inconsequential. This is today's fading form of the disregard for civil liberties inherent in the Stalinist mentality.

It is the watershed which separates the democratic from the authoritarian left. The former has always stood, firm and unwavering, on the side of freedom. Willy Brandt, legendary leader of the SPD in Germany, once said:

'If I have to say what is more important to me than anything else besides peace, my answer is without "ifs" and "buts": freedom. Freedom for the many, not just for the few. Freedom of conscience and opinion. Also, freedom from want and from fear.'

Even in our global political debates, such as the controversy over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 'freedom' is ultimately central. Most who advocate appeasement of Vladimir Putin's Russia see the war as a territorial — some would admit imperialist — conflict. Those who support Ukraine in its defence efforts, on the other hand, see primarily a clash between a democratic country that has established institutions of a liberal constitutional order and an autocratic regime that wants to subjugate it.

Individual freedom as a social being

In a sidestream flow the contemporary debates about 'political correctness' and 'cancel culture', where some leftists at least give the impression that they want to impose a lifestyle or ways of speaking on others through authoritarian measures and to sanction deviations — even within the limits of what is permitted — through social pressure. We should not, however sympathetic we might be to the motivation, ignore the associated ambivalences.

But then, if we look deeper, as also with some distance and sobriety, the concept of 'freedom' has always carried interesting ambiguities. It began with the Enlightenment and the struggle for freedom of expression and thought against absolutist rule. The revolutions of 1848 were about democratic rights: freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, political freedom up to and including free elections.

After the successful struggles against the towering monsters of autocracy, freedom always

These efforts were poignantly suggestive of liberation from all constraint, conformism and convention — counterposing to dead moral values a *laissez-faire* lifestyle — and they engendered a loose alliance between the political revolutionaries and reformers and the cultural

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bohemians. This alliance for freedom has been a thread throughout history: even the social-liberal reformers of the 1960s and 70s pulled together in a certain way with the 'counterculture', hippies and punks.

After the successful struggles against the towering monsters of autocracy, freedom always had a hard time sustaining itself on flat, undistinguished social terrain. Emperors and dictators provided visible enemies for rebels to charge — unlike the subjectless structures and processes of global capitalism.

Above all, however, in democratic societies based on popular sovereignty, the tricky dilemma between individual freedom and binding order immediately arises, as the legendary constitutional scholar Hans Kelsen put it: when decisions are made by majority rule, they are also binding for the minority and every individual. We have to an extent solved this problem in most democratic states, with a commitment to human-rights conventions and a constitutional distribution of power (including an independent judiciary).

At the same time, in democratic welfare states, ministers empowered by a free constitution are obliged to increase the welfare of individuals and to protect their security, with associated encroachments on individual liberties where purportedly objectively justified. This is the basis of our compulsory tax and social-insurance systems, our traffic regulations including speed limits and, of course, social restrictions in a pandemic.

The order of freedom we have established is thus in tension with the rules guaranteeing coexistence among the social animal *Homo sapiens*, denying the individual absolute freedom to do as he or she pleases. Trade-offs are unavoidable in reality.

The democratic left is the real force of freedom in history.

But even this is not the end of the tangled story. For there are also 'conditions of freedom' — and scarcity, insecurity, lack of opportunity and gross inequality are major obstacles to realising it. If these are in place, there is a lot of freedom for the few but little for the many: as the English socialist RH Tawney put it in *Equality*: 'freedom for the pike is death for the minnow.'

Guaranteeing the conditions of freedom for as many as possible requires in turn limiting economic freedom and taming a predatory capitalism in which the big fish eat the little fish. Clever minds have been pondering

for more than a century how to achieve economic regulation that works towards equality without establishing a bureaucratic command system that would once again stifle individual agency and creativity. Imposed equality can easily degenerate into grey dreariness and the power of bureaucrats over the lives of individuals.

The democratic left is the real force of freedom in history. This left is not only against authoritarian coercion and censorship and for freedom of association and expression. Real leftists are also against the pressure to conform — that 'tyranny of the majority' of which John Stuart Mill wrote in *On Liberty*, demanding 'that different persons may lead different lives'.

They also have an alert sensibility to the freedom-restricting effects of material inequality which *de facto* denies the underprivileged a self-determined life. Progressives have an awareness too of the loss of freedom caused by the sense of alienation in modern society among those who feel only a cog in an impersonal apparatus — stuck in the iron cage of bureaucracy to which Max Weber feared a capitalism shorn of a motivating 'Protestant ethic' in favour of the predominance of instrumental, 'rational' individual action would lead.

The left must take back the concept of freedom from the libertarians. And we must attack the mentality that pretends that nothing more is possible.

Freedom means not being commanded. Freedom means being able to raise one's voice and be heard. Freedom also means that every individual has the same moral worth.

But freedom means too being able to try things out — having not only the theoretical capacity to do so but also the resources that make this practicable. This includes the security of not falling into a bottomless pit if one fails in these attempts to find and go one's own way.

These constant efforts by individuals or groups make freedom something vibrant and romantic. Freedom stands on feet of clay when it is reduced to the right of atomised citizens to live mistrustfully side by side. Freedom without freedom from fear is an amputated freedom. Freedom without the possibility to breathe life into it is a hollowed-out freedom.

We have realised half-freedom. This is no small thing and we should not underestimate it. But the left must take back the concept of freedom from the libertarians. And we must attack the mentality that pretends that nothing more is possible.

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