Freedom (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

Freedom

According to a philosophical tradition that finds its home in the Enlightenment, human freedom is the basic value of civil society, i.e., of society as a collective association of citizens. This means that the realization and protection of human freedom is the aim of civil society, that for the sake for which civil society ought to be set up. On this view, a political society is a good one to the extent that it makes possible the freedom of its citizens. It is a bad one otherwise – one that needs to be transcended and replaced with a society that makes freedom possible.

Both Marx and the radical bourgeois liberals belong in this philosophical tradition. They are united in taking freedom to be the basic political principle. Where they differ is in their conceptions of freedom, in their understanding of what freedom means or consists in. This has implications for the kind of society they endorse.

Allowing that different liberal theorists conceive of freedom in different ways, generally speaking, and as the French bourgeois revolutionaries put it in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* and of the Citizen, freedom for the liberals is the ability 'to do everything which does not harm others.' As Marx observes, this is a conception of freedom that centers on separation. Individuals are conceived as separate units who are free just in case they are free from harming each other. The other is seen by the liberals as imposing a limit to one's own freedom (see *'The Jewish Question'*). An individual would be maximally free for them in a world where she alone existed: nothing she could do would harm another in such a world — there would not beanother to harm — and so nothing would constitute a limit to her freedom.

Marx finds this liberal view of freedom to be mistaken. As he puts it, it makes 'every man see in other men not the realization of his own freedom, but the barrier to it' ('The Jewish Question'). This renders the liberal conception of freedom untenable, Marx concludes, because others, far from blocking our freedom, in fact make it possible.

Why is this? Marx offers two lines of argument, each corresponding to a distinct form of human freedom. The first form of freedom is what we might call the freedom to self-govern. Human beings are free in this sense just in case they can determine for themselves the reality under which they live – just in case they can design and implement for themselves social norms and institutions (economic, political, cultural, etc) by which they will live and regulate their lives. This is a task that can only be done collectively. I cannot put in place a social system of e.g. material production unless those I am living with are willing to cooperate. This is the first sense in which the realization of my freedom requires others.

Marx's second line of argument has to do with a different but not unrelated conception of freedom. We might call this freedom the freedom to flourish. As Marx understands it, human flourishing or well-being consists in the development and exercise of distinctly human capacities, capacities that are put to use in activities like education, science, culture, athleticism, art, friendship, love, conversation, and so on. The flourishing human life for Marx is a life that is characterized by a devotion to these sorts of activities.

What is so special about these activities, such that the good human life depends on them? And in what sense do they express human freedom? What is special about these activities for Marx is that they are pursued freely, or for their own sake. We pursue friendship because we enjoy it, not because we are compelled to do so by some other need. Contrast this with paid work. We do not generally pursue paid work simply for the sake of it, simply because we enjoy it. We pursue paid work because we would otherwise have no money, and so no food, housing, healthcare, and much else. In this way, we are compelledto engage in paid work. Paid work is not an activity that we pursue for its own sake, or freely. We pursue it for the sake of some other need, and so under compulsion.

This is why Marx speaks of human flourishing in terms of freedom. By Marx's lights, human flourishing is what happens when human beings are able to engage in activities that call for free rather than compulsive engagement. This is related to his first conception of freedom, freedom as self-governance. Because human beings are beings who can choose for themselves how to live, a life of compulsion – a life that is grounded in necessity – is unfit for them. The life that fits them is a life that involves activities that are pursued freely. But these freedom-realizing activities – education, science, culture, friendship etc – are all social. They presuppose collective, and often intergenerational, social practices, as in the case of scientific and cultural progress, which relies on the work of those who have come before. Thus, these freedom-realizing activities require civil society.

Marx's conception of freedom leads to a radical critique of bourgeois society, the society we live in today. That form of society is underpinned by the liberal conception of freedom, and Marx has shown this conception to be confused. In the first instance, Marx's account of freedom as self-governance is incompatible with basic tenets of the bourgeois order, most notably the capitalist mode of production and its social laws. For example, as Max Horkheimer puts it, in bourgeois society, the unemployed worker is asked to accept as objectively necessary the fact that economic laws make it impossible for him to be hired, because conditions are such that firms cannot afford to take on new staff (see *'The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom'*). But of course the laws governing social systems, such as economic systems, are social, and so up to us, and so not at all impossible to change – so long as we take charge of our conditions of existence. In treating these laws as immutable, bourgeois society abnegates responsibility for this task, failing to give expression to our freedom to self-govern.

But bourgeois society also fails to give expression to our freedom to flourish. Since this freedom requires the pursuit of free rather than compulsive activity, the life of wage labor, on which the capitalist mode of production rests, is ruled out. Wage labor is the paradigm example of compulsive activity: it is not pursued for its own sake, but for the sake of something else – namely, survival. The life of the wage laborer is the life of someone condemned to this form of activity, a life that is grounded in sheer necessity. This is why we insist, following Marx, on a significant reduction of the working day, and ultimately the abolition of wage labor. This does not mean the abolition of production. It only means the abolition of the current form of production, which depends on the unfreedom of the wage laborer.

In the following chapters, we elaborate on the Marxian conception of freedom and identify and explain why bourgeois society with its capitalist form of production is unfree, alienating, oppressive and exploitative for the mass of its members.

From the collection of "Our Position on Capitalism: What It Is, and Why We Should Be Against It".

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