

UNFREEDOM

It may seem strange to speak of “unfreedom” as one of the “New Basics.” Why not *freedom*? After all, freedom is one of our most cherished political ideals. Freedom is what inspires people to movements and revolutions. Wars, both hot and cold, are fought for freedom. People risk their lives for freedom, whether freedom from police brutality or freedom not to be vaccinated against COVID-19. The ideal of freedom, we might think with the Western tradition of political thought, is what is basic.

But freedom is also a contested and a dangerous ideal precisely because it is so cherished. For example, freedom has been taken by some to be *the* distinguishing feature of civilization. It distinguishes the “West” from the “Rest”; it is what “we” have and “they” don’t. Recall George W. Bush after September 11th: “They hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.” And Bush is in good philosophical company: G. W. F. Hegel writes in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* of the “Orientals” that they “do not know that ... the human being as such is intrinsically free; because they do not know this, they are not themselves free.” Worse, for Hegel, Africa is not even part of human history, but rather part of “the natural context of world history,” for there “slavery is the basic legal relationship,” and “the basic principle of slavery is that man is not yet conscious of his freedom.” For Bush and for Hegel, this lack of freedom is what legitimates Western colonialism and imperialism. It is why, for Hegel, history, like the sun, moves from East to West. The West has progressed farther along the course of history. So it is the job of the West to civilise the Rest. Freedom is what the U.S. brings to the Middle East and brought to Vietnam, the Philippines, Mexico, and South America. And freedom is dangerous inside what we call the West too. It is the watchword of the anti-vaccination movement, of the exploitations of the gig economy, of the media companies who push out misleading and biased information day after day after day.

So, freedom, like all lofty ideals, can be dangerous. We may privilege one kind of freedom over all others, thinking it is what is to be protected at all costs. Take the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Lochner v. New York* (1905). There, the Court held that an individual’s freedom to contract was absolute and could not be interfered with, even where such contracts were signed under huge power imbalances between employer and

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employee, and bound workers into exploitative and unsafe working conditions that they did not have the freedom to change. Or we may think that we are justified in forcing what we take to be freedom on others. Isaiah Berlin was exceptionally worried about “positive” conceptions of liberty on which individuals were only truly free when they acted in consonance with their “true self”. For perhaps others – the philosopher-king, the colonial administrator, or the Communist Party official – know my “true self” better than I do; if so, Berlin worried, they would be justified in forcing me to be free.

Freedom can mislead us. In focusing on the lofty ideal of freedom, we turn our eyes to the heavens above, and, like Thales, we may lose sight of what is in front of us: forms of *unfreedom*. Unfreedom is the normal state of affairs. It is right before our eyes. Workers are bound to alienating and exploitative work, where they can get it. Women are forced to pay impossible amounts of money and travel impossible distances to

get abortions, where they are legal. Black people and other communities of colour are pushed into ghettos, and then when those areas become desirable, are forced out by rising rent and costs of living. People living with disabilities are unable to access basic infrastructure, and are left without the support necessary to live a decent life. The global South is, and increasingly countries in the global North are, trapped in cycles of debt and locked into economic policies that serve not their citizens, but only the short-term interests of multinational corporations. Unfreedom is not only normal, it is systemic.

In this way unfreedom is what Judith Shklar might call a “primary experience.” But because it is right in front of us, we have a tendency to direct our gaze towards a goal about which we know much less – “freedom” or “justice” – and to take the negative state simply as the *absence* of that less known and theoretically contested positive state. Instead, as Shklar argues, we ought to theorise the negative state itself, to begin



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from unfreedom, injustice, imperfection. Starting from unfreedom is a kind of *non-ideal theory*, theory that takes as its *starting point* the non-ideal.

What does it mean to begin from unfreedom? We can take inspiration from the word “liberation” and the movements that claim liberation as their goal. “Liberation” invites the question: liberation *from what*? So, the first (though not the last) step in liberation is to understand the conditions of unfreedom from which we want to liberate ourselves.

This method is also that of pragmatism. For pragmatists, philosophical inquiry begins when one is faced with a problem. That problem drives the inquiry. Unfreedom is the problem to which freedom is the response. Beginning with unfreedom means that we do not assume at the start a conception of freedom, but let that conception be determined by what can change our unfreedom. In that way, as John Lewis says, “freedom is the continuous action we all must take”.

The first step in pragmatist inquiry, according to John Dewey, is to characterise properly the problem, to turn what is a felt state of unease into something more concrete. So, what is the experience of unfreedom? Let me compare again unfreedom to injustice. Shklar characterises injustice as what gives rise to (justified) anger and indignation at a wrong. The response to injustice is a cry of “that is not right” and “that is not fair.” Injustice is characterised by a feeling of unfairness and of *indignation* at that unfairness. The experience of injustice is philosophically instructive. It reveals connections between injustice, wrong, unfairness, and so by correlation between justice, right, fairness.

We can say of unfreedom, by contrast, that it involves an experience of constraint or denial. There is something I should be able or want to do or to achieve and cannot. That experience gives rise to *frustration*. Frustration is the experiential guide to unfreedom. It asks us to understand the causes of that frustration and what might relieve it. Of course, not all experiences of this sort are true cases of unfreedom, and not all cases of unfreedom are felt in this way. Just because one has a feeling of constraint does not mean that the feeling is justified. And one can come, as Jean-Jacques

Rousseau says, to love one’s chains. This is just to say that we may not have a full grasp of our present state of unfreedom. We have to examine more deeply those experiences to understand what they reveal to us. And our unfreedom may itself mislead us into thinking that our unfreedom is other than it really is. Nonetheless, the experiential aspect gives us some handle on the kind of thing unfreedom is. The experience reveals to us the connection between unfreedom and agency. Unfreedom is not just a matter of states of the world, but how the world affects and shapes how we think, feel, and act.

IN FOCUSING ON THE LOFTY IDEAL OF FREEDOM, WE TURN OUR EYES TO THE HEAVENS ABOVE, AND, LIKE THALES, WE MAY LOSE SIGHT OF WHAT IS IN FRONT OF US: FORMS OF UNFREEDOM

This connection between unfreedom and agency is important. Beginning with unfreedom directs our attention to the agential *tools* that we can use to make ourselves freer. These tools may not have a place in a picture of ideal freedom, for what need would there be for them? We may think, for example, that anger has no place in an ideally free society, for there would be nothing to get angry at. Yet anger at the systems and institutions that keep us unfree is an important motivation for political action and political change. So too something like solidarity is a tool for resisting unfreedom that may not come into the picture if we focus solely on ideals of freedom. Solidarity is a means to draw connections between kinds of unfreedom, those that face us and those that we do not face directly.

So, what is unfreedom if the experience of unfreedom is frustration? Of course, unfreedom takes many specific forms, from slavery to authoritarianism to group-based forms of oppression and domination, to ideological false consciousness. But, at its most



general, we can say that unfreedom is the *socially caused and systematic impoverishment of agential capacities or their exercise*.

Unfreedom is not a matter of the natural impossibilities of life, for example the incapacity I have to fly unaided. It is *socially caused*; caused by features of our social relations with others. What I have in mind are not the small inconveniences of living with others, the little constraints we live with so we can all get along. Rather, unfreedom of the deepest sort is *systematic*. It lives in the fundamental social systems that shape our lives and opportunities – the economic system by which we earn a living, the systems of racial and patriarchal and imperial power that determine our statuses with respect to each other.

I distinguish between agential capacities and the *exercise* of those capacities to illustrate different forms of unfreedom. The exercise of our agential capacities can be impoverished in a number of ways. The most simple is coercion: the exercise of force to prevent us from doing something, for example through arrest and imprisonment, or through borders and walls. But there are other, more complex forms by which agency is rendered ineffective.

Exercising agency requires resources. To think and act effectively requires time and space; as Virginia Woolf said, “a room of one’s own.” It requires materials – money, bodies, books, food. And these resources can be taken away from us, hoarded for others’ use. We can be rendered bereft, without the means to do what we want or need to do.

Or the agency of others can be mobilised to frustrate our agency. Colonial administrators used “divide and conquer” tactics to pit different groups against each other. Local groups were given certain privileges and powers to support colonial governance on the ground, forming a “comprador” class that benefited materially at the expense of other groups in the colonies. In colonial north India, for example, the Zamindars – local rulers – were granted ownership rights over land by the East India Company, and in turn collected rents on behalf of the Company. Patriarchy distinguishes between “good” and “bad” women (and “good” and “bad” men). If you follow the gender rules, you’ll get ahead. But break the rules – by being a tomboy, or a camp man, by being trans, by being queer – and you’ll get what’s coming to you. Capitalism sets us all in competition for limited resources. There are only so many jobs and so few promotions, and we’re all fighting for them. (Leave aside the “fact” that the “immigrants are taking all our jobs”.) These are structures of what B. R. Ambedkar called *graded inequality*. Hierarchies are rarely binary. They come in grades. And each grade, in order to keep what they have, is motivated to push down on those below them.

UNFREEDOM IS THE SOCIALLY CAUSED AND SYSTEMATIC IMPOVERISHMENT OF AGENTIAL CAPACITIES OR THEIR EXERCISE

Structures of hierarchy and oppression can constrict the exercise of our agency and render it ineffective. But those systems can cut deeper. They impoverish our very capacities for agency, both by *shaping* the form these capacities take and *undermining* them. For example, we all have hopes and dreams. But capitalism shapes those hopes and dreams to make them solely about individual achievement. Our hope is for our own success, to “make it big”. And this, in conjunction with the competitive struggle that capitalism engenders, means that achieving our hopes occurs (when it does) at the expense, or on the backs, of others. *Collective* hopes are discouraged. Or, as Frantz Fanon noted –

a feeling that I have myself experienced – people of colour under white supremacy come to feel that the best thing they can be is *white*. That is one reason for a host of phenomena, including “colourism” – preferences for lighter-skinned members of a racial or ethnic group over darker-skinned members – and medical interventions like skin bleaching or double eyelid surgery. These hopes and desires are *shaped* by the social institutions (like capitalism and white supremacy) in which we live.

Some agential capacities may be thoroughly *undermined*. Take our capacity for imagination, and think of the *impossibility* of imagining, seriously, an alternative to capitalism. As Mark Fisher famously put it, it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Or take the thoroughgoing anxieties and fears and self-doubts, caused by having one’s sense of self constantly attacked, that are endemic effects of racism and misogyny and other forms of oppression. Such anxieties undermine one’s capacities for self-determination, for speaking one’s mind, for thinking one’s own thoughts, which are so essential for political action and political change. These impoverishments are not limited to those who are oppressed. The oppressors too are unfree. What Charles Mills and others have called “white ignorance” is one such impoverishment – the self-imposed inability to confront fully one’s role in institutions of white supremacy. This is an undermining of one’s capacity for self-knowledge. Similarly, those with privilege can lack sympathy for those who are suffering. This is a limitation on their capacity for fellow-feeling.

Unfreedom thus consists both in the *external* social constraints on the exercise of agency and in the *internal* shaping of agency by those social structures. But our agency is what we use to change existing social structures and to build new ones. So the fact that unfreedom cuts at both levels raises the following possibility: that the social conditions that make us unfree (in the first sense) so deeply shape and undermine our agency (in the second sense) that we are unable to change those conditions. Unfreedom may form a vicious cycle. The social conditions constrain our agency, which in turn entrenches the social conditions. We can call this the *problem of unfreedom*: if we are



unfree because of the social conditions in which we find ourselves, and to change those conditions requires exercising our freedom, then, it seems, we must already be free in order to become free.

FOCUSING ON THESE DYNAMICS OF UNFREEDOM CAN LARGELY BE DONE WITHOUT INVOKING ANY IDEAL OF FREEDOM

How we are to grapple with this problem of unfreedom is a difficult question that cannot be answered here. It involves a deeper investigation into how the social structures of unfreedom shape and constrain our agency. One way out of the problem is for the unfree to place their faith in others, those who are already free. Yet this seems to buy a theoretical solution to the problem at the cost of reinforcing the same dynamics

that gave rise to it: those who are free “bringing freedom” to those who aren’t.

Another path may be found in the possibilities of collective action: working together to understand the conditions of our joint unfreedom, and working to dismantle them from within. Here our hope is not placed in others as saviours, but in others as comrades. And our reliance on them is at the same time their reliance on us. This is the path of solidarity, resistance, and collective transformation.

Focusing on these dynamics of unfreedom can largely be done without invoking any ideal of freedom. Such a philosophical inquiry helps us understand the deeply imperfect conditions in which we live. From there, we might be able to move from within unfreedom toward different ideals of freedom. With that understanding, we might, each of us and all of us together, be able to act to change our situation for the better.

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