# Negative and Positive Freedom: Lesson from, and to, Sociology

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Abstract

Isaiah Berlin’s ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ was a milestone in the development of modern political theory, with his advocacy of negative freedom supporting the neo-liberal demand for ‘freedom from’ the state. This article defends the positive conception of freedom by calling on the neglected insights of the sociological tradition. I demonstrate how Marx, Durkheim and Simmel all understood freedom to be a socially conditioned phenomenon, with ‘freedom from’ being an idealist fiction (Marx), and a recipe for anomie (Durkheim) and loss of meaning (Simmel). I argue, however, that positive freedom as it was theorised by the classical sociologists must be distinguished from the more fashionable idea of individual self-realisation and self-identity, a notion equally susceptible to idealist constructions, and one increasingly targeted by Foucault-inspired critics. Instead I draw on Hannah Arendt and André Gorz to show how positive freedom should be theorised as a worldly, conflictual, and pre-eminently political affair.
Negative Freedom

Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ (1969a), advanced a defence of negative liberty which has had considerable influence. Berlin introduced a distinction between two conceptualisations of freedom which, in his view, expressed two historically rooted and philosophically elaborated attitudes to political life that were essentially irreconcilable. Negative liberty is the idea that people are free when they are unimpeded by interference from others. Believing that a minimum degree of negative freedom was sacrosanct, the classical English political philosophers favoured this conception, disagreeing only on the optimum magnitude of this freedom, with the more pessimistic philosophers of human nature, such as Hobbes, willing to trade more private liberty to the public power of the state.

In its classical form, negative liberty was understood to be an inherent good in itself, independent of its consequences. Berlin, who placed himself in this liberal tradition, defended negative freedom for guaranteeing the maximum possible opportunities to act, regardless of whether people take those opportunities or what virtues or goals they ultimately choose to pursue. Individuals or groups who, given negative freedom from their erstwhile oppressors, continue to do what they were previously coerced to do, would still have received, according to this conception, an increase in their freedom.

Negative freedom includes the legal right to do that which social conditions make practically impossible (the shortage of jobs, for example, making scarce the employer whom the worker is legally free to contract with). Negative freedom, Berlin stressed, is neither the act of freedom nor the conditions for its enactment. ‘Freedom is the opportunity to act, not action itself’; ‘liberty is one thing, and the conditions for it are another’ (1969b: xlii, liii). Failure to make these distinctions, Berlin argued,
tempts people to remedy ‘useless freedoms’ with a rational paternalism that provides the conditions for a freedom that is defined so rigidly that its existence is effectively annulled. ‘There is a minimum level of opportunity for choice – not of rational or virtuous choice – below which human activity ceases to be free in any meaningful sense.’ (1969b: lii)

**Positive Freedom**

The philosophers of negative freedom understood that liberty could not be unlimited. To prevent the collision of private interests resulting in inequalities – whether of freedom itself, or of other competing values such as security or efficiency – and in recognition of the importance of other goods, like culture, knowledge or happiness, which are not the most likely outcome of unfettered choice, negative freedom was always to be curtailed by law. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that in Berlin’s account a second conceptualisation of freedom emerged apparently in conflict with the first. If negative freedom is freedom from being governed by others, positive freedom is ‘freedom to’ govern – a freedom that must logically define what it is to be self-governing, which must give freedom a *content*, a character, and make it a determinate activity rather than simply the opportunity to act.

Berlin recognised that positive freedom was an intrinsically valuable goal, if not a ‘fundamental human need’ (1969b: xlvii). He also acknowledged that the principle of negative liberty had resulted in social evils. Positive freedom was the more problematic conception, however, because in seeking to give specific content to the actions and choices of free individuals, it inevitably excludes competing goods (and competing conceptions of the good life), demanding instead a frictionless world of self-realisation devoid of painful choices and sacrifices. Even the ‘mild and
humane liberalism of T. H. Green’ – the Oxford don whose revitalisation of idealist
philosophy appealed so keenly to the ‘Radical’ wing of the British Liberal Party and
its early nineteenth-century vision of a Welfare State – was in Berlin’s view
vulnerable to authoritarian interpretation. Green described ‘freedom from restraint or
compulsion’ as ‘only a means to an end’, the noblest end being ‘freedom in the
positive sense’ – that is, ‘the greater power on the part of the citizens as a body to
make the most and best of themselves’ (1964: 51-3). ‘Green was a genuine liberal’,
Berlin concedes, but his Aristotelian enthusiasm for self-realisation and moral
improvement meant ‘many a tyrant could use this formula to justify his worst acts of
oppression’ (1969a: 150, 133 n1).

Berlin’s view was that the perverse consequences of positive freedom had
acquired intellectual credence from ancient philosophies of self-abnegation, the
recommendation of which was that people could liberate themselves by repudiating
desires that could not be realised. After its early stoic and ascetic forms, this idea
converged with the Enlightenment belief in rational laws higher than those of instinct,
emotion or appetite. As in Kant’s theory of a transcendent subject standing outside the
realm of natural causality, obedience to these laws, since they were the judgement of
higher reason, could not be called coercion. From the perspective of this ‘rationalist
metaphysics’, because reason is universal to humans, conflicts over values and goals
can be eliminated by organising society on rational principles. The protests of
individuals or groups who dissent from these principles can then be disqualified on
the grounds that they have yet to realise their true or higher interests. It was precisely
this ‘positive doctrine of liberation by reason’ which Berlin – along with Hayek,
Popper, and other anti-communist philosophers of the post-war period – believed was
‘at the heart of many of the nationalist, communist, authoritarian, and totalitarian
creeds of our day’ (1969a: 144). Only negative freedom could protect people from this rational monism.

**The Primacy of Society: Marx and Durkheim**

‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ and its kindred essays were originally written between 1949 and 1959, a period in which the Warsaw Pact, the Russian invasion of Hungary, and the disclosure of Stalin’s crimes had escalated ideological as well as military tensions between the Cold War antagonists. In the 1969 republication of these pieces in *Four Essays on Freedom*, Berlin softened his defence of the liberal orthodoxy, using a lengthy introduction, and new footnotes to the essays, to qualify and moderate his position. ‘I am not offering a blank endorsement of the “negative” concept as opposed to its “positive” twin brother,’ he now explained, ‘since this would itself constitute precisely the kind of intolerant monism against which the entire argument is directed’ (1969b: lviii n1). While his essay on ‘Historical Inevitability’ originally accused Marx and Hegel – ‘the two great prophets of destruction’ – of believing in the existence of inexorable, all-encompassing historical laws (1969c: 60-3), a footnote to a similar observation at the beginning of ‘Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century’ dissociates this belief from the thinkers themselves: ‘I do not, of course, attribute this view to Hegel or to Marx, whose doctrines are both more complex and far more plausible; only to the *terribles simplificateurs* among their followers.’ (1969d: 1 n2)

Notwithstanding his debt to Hegel’s metaphysical system, Marx was, as Berlin certainly knew, notoriously vague about the content of positive freedom in a classless society – a leisurely combination of hunting, fishing, cattle-rearing and thinking, being pretty much as far as his and Engels’ imagination went (Marx and Engels, 1998: 53). Doctrines of moral improvement, Engels emphasised, were transient ‘class
moralties’, either justifying the interests of the dominant class or expressing
‘indignation against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed’ (Engels,
1969: 114-5). The end of class society would be, as Marx put it, the end of ‘pre-
history’, true history – and ‘a really human morality’ – being whatever people chose
to make of it once they had abolished class antagonisms and the despotic division of
labour (Marx, 1970: 22; Engels, 1969: 115). Marx was interested not in utopian
speculation but social critique, and for this the negative freedom of bourgeois right
was a sitting target. When feudal relations of fealty and obligation were transformed
into contractual relations of competition and exchange, Marx argued, ‘freedom from’
the coercive demands of a master was secured by exposing the majority of the
population to merciless economic forces seemingly beyond all human control. ‘Thus,
in imagination, individuals seem freer under the dominance of the bourgeoisie than
before, because their conditions of life seem accidental; in reality, of course, they are
less free, because they are to a greater extent governed by material forces.’ (Marx and
Engels, 1998: 87)

Marx’s view was not that workers’ negative economic freedom was
inadequate, but that it was really the fictitious ideological expression of an alienated
freedom; that is, a positive, productive freedom compelled to produce and reproduce
the very condition – capital – of its own subjection and dependence. Whereas Berlin
believed the negative economic rights that were enshrined in the free market
guaranteed a pluralism of values and ends, Marx observed how under capitalism the
diversity of needs, preferences and ends – the diversity of ‘use-values’ whose
consumption in pre-capitalist society was the primary motivation for production and
trade – were ultimately subordinated to the monism of value that Marx called
‘valorisation’ [Verwertung]. The end which workers served, which transcended and
trivialised all concrete choices, judgements and desires, was that which is a means to its own quantitative expansion: namely, profit.

The simple circulation of commodities – selling in order to buy – is a means to a final goal which lies outside circulation, namely the appropriation of use-values, the satisfaction of needs. As against this, the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorisation of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of capital is therefore limitless. (Marx 1976: 253)

Marx was also eager to show that the apparent neutrality of exchange-value was a masquerade – a ‘fetishism’ – which concealed the way the so-called ‘private interests’ of contracting parties, far from expressing their natural autonomy, were a reflection and perpetuation of specific social relations of production: ‘private interest is itself already a socially determined interest, which can be achieved only within the conditions laid down by society and with the means provided by society; hence it is bound to the reproduction of these conditions and means’ (Marx 1973: 156).

Reflecting on Max Stirner’s ‘ascetic’ belief that the path to freedom lay in riddance of the world that impeded it, Marx and Engels reminded him that ‘freedom’ for the ascending bourgeoisie was prefabricated by socially constructed goals and interests – the competitive accumulation of capital being the overriding imperative – with the concept of negative freedom being the ideological reflex of these alienated social relationships. For Marx and Engels it was not the idea of positive freedom which engendered the kind of abstract and fantastical thinking that Berlin would later associate with totalitarian doctrines. On the contrary, it was the bourgeois fetishising
of ‘freedom from’ – from the yoke of serfdom or the demands of feudal patronage –
which succoured the idealist abstraction ‘Man’, devoid of historically determined
needs. While Stirner believed that freedom, being negative and essentially spiritual in
character, would always feel morbidly antagonised by physical obstacles and
limitations – its bourgeois protagonists inventing railways to escape the limitations of
the horse and cart, only to feel impeded by the impossibility of flying – Marx and
Engels reminded him of the material conditioning of human interests: ‘nowhere are
railways built for the sake of the category “freedom from”; Saint Max could have
realised this even from the fact that no one builds railways in order to free himself
from his money’. Only an ‘inactive petty bourgeois’, removed from the labour process
and ‘for whom railways dropped from the sky’, could entertain the utopian fantasy of
being free from social and material reality. (Marx and Engels, 1998: 320-2, emphasis
in original.)

Marx – who incidentally complained, again in The German Ideology, that
Stirner had failed to properly ‘consult Hegel on negative and positive freedom’ (1998:
324) – was not the only founding thinker in the sociological tradition to have
understood the historical conditioning of private interests, choices and goals. Whereas
Marx viewed negative freedom as something ‘negatively’ conditioned – by the
alienated social relations of competitive individualism and class conflict –
Durkheim’s more conciliatory stance was that negative freedom was a desirable
achievement, but only to the extent that it was ‘positively’ conditioned by collective
values and common moral ideals. In The Division of Labour in Society, Durkheim had
written of a ‘negative’ and a ‘positive’ form of solidarity, the first based on the
principle of abstention, in which ‘the parties who compose it should not interfere with
one another through discordant movements’, the second involving moral bonds of
sociability, commitment and co-operation. Whereas Berlin believed positive freedom was unthinkable without the negative freedom of the liberal tradition, Durkheim noted that the opposite was true: negative contractual liberties were secure only because they presupposed ‘obligations which have not been contracted for’. ‘In reality,’ Durkheim famously wrote, ‘for men to recognise and mutually guarantee rights, they must, first of all, love each other’. This was not love of particular empirical individuals, but love of the idea of the individual – the ‘cult of individual dignity’ (1964: 120, 212, 121, 172, 400).

Hence it was Kant – whose ‘rationalist metaphysics’, Berlin argued, persuaded his disciples to propose ‘something close to a pure totalitarian doctrine’ (1969a: 152) – whom Durkheim (1973) applauded for having identified a form of ‘moral individualism’ rooted in a respect for all members of the human community. Only on the basis of this culture of liberal humanism, this shared reverence for the individual in general, could negative liberties be civilised and restrained, whether by custom or by laws that carried positive moral authority. ‘The theoretician may demonstrate that man has the right to liberty, but, whatever the value of these demonstrations, it is certain that this liberty can become a reality in and through society.’ (Durkheim, 1974: 55, 58, 72) It is society, moreover, that gives the developing child the powers of self-discipline and moral understanding, and which, by setting limits to people’s appetites and defining the ideals that they can and should pursue, enables them to resist the tyranny of fleeting impulses and transient whims and achieve ‘a full sense of self-realisation’ (1961: 40). Hence ‘liberty itself is the product of regulation’ (1964: 386), because it is through ‘the practice of moral rules [that] we develop the capacity to govern and regulate ourselves’. ‘Self-mastery is the first condition of all true power, of all liberty worthy of the name’, Durkheim asserted in his lectures on Moral
Education. And for this liberty to be stable and enduring, it must be aroused by a positive ‘faith in a common ideal’ and in ‘the pursuit of great collective ends’ (1961: 54, 44-6, 100-103; see also 2001: 200-202).

The Emptiness of Negative Freedom: Simmel

From Durkheim’s rationalist perspective, ‘freedom from’ the blind and irrational forces of nature presupposed a ‘freedom to’ that could be nurtured only by the impersonal norms, concepts and ideals of collective life. That this positive freedom exacts a price – that it ‘does unceasing violence to our natural appetites, precisely because it raises us above ourselves’ (2001: 235) – was a frequent observation in Durkheim’s thinking. Georg Simmel shared this sensitivity to the costs of modern life, though from the perspective of German Romanticism the tragic conflict was not, for him, a Cartesian struggle between body and mind, nature and civilisation, so much as between the spirit of freedom and the cultural forms required for its articulation. ‘Life is inseparably charged with contradiction. It can enter reality only in the form of its antithesis, that is, only in the form of form.’ (Simmel, 1968a: 25, emphasis in original.) Yet forms of culture are not equivalent, Simmel argued. In the ‘arc that passes from the subject to the object, incorporates the object and returns to the subject’ (2004: 205), some objects feed seamlessly back into the life process, ripening, refining and refreshing it. In these cases, ‘the spirit reaches an objectivity which makes it at once independent of all accidents of subjective reproductions, and yet usable for the central purpose of subjective perfection’ (1968b: 45). Other cultural objects, especially those more typical of complex industrial societies, are resistant to subjective assimilation, however. They reflect – like the ‘inert facticity’ described by Berger and Luckmann (1967), or the ‘practico-inert’ in Sartre’s (1991) version of
historical materialism – what Simmel called the ‘emancipation of the objectified spirit’ (1968b: 46).

This is well-illustrated in *The Philosophy of Money*, where Simmel describes money as ‘the purest reification of means’. A colourless and heartless cultural form that is indifferent to particular contents, qualities and purposes, ‘money is both the most responsive and, because of its complete emptiness, the most irresponsible object’ (Simmel, 2004: 325). Echoing Marx’s Shakespearean description of money as ‘the universal means of separation’ (Marx, 1975a: 376-7), Simmel notes how the commuting of honorific social bonds into monetary exchanges enables the liquidation of obligations and dependencies, but at the same time encourages a retreat into the kind of abstract freedom that, according to Marx, Stirner had found in Hegel’s idealism. ‘Money solves the task of realising human freedom in a purely negative sense’, Simmel writes, but this is ‘only freedom *from* something, not liberty *to do* something’ (2004: 402, emphasis in original).

The problem is that the freedom made possible by the market economy, by relieving individuals of personal duties and commitments, drains the positive ‘direction-giving significance’ that derives from concrete relationships and things. The frustrated intolerance to limitations that preoccupied Stirner – which is the same ‘exasperated infatuation’ and ‘disease of the infinite’ that Durkheim (1951: 284-9) called ‘anomie’ – is for Simmel the logical consequence of a purely negative freedom. For Simmel, the ‘insecurity and disloyalty in relation to specific possessions which is part of the money economy has to be paid for by the very modern feeling that the hoped for satisfaction that is connected with new acquisitions immediately grows beyond them’, such that ‘the core and meaning of life always slips through one’s
hand’. This is ‘one of the reasons why the freedom of liberalism has brought about so
much instability, disorder and dissatisfaction’ (2004: 404).

In Simmel’s account, positive freedom gains traction from the uniqueness of
the objects it encounters, since it is precisely this quality which arouses the desire to
dwell amongst and acquaint oneself with the determinate world of things: ‘an object
can mean something to us only by being substantially something in itself; only then,
to the extent that the object sets limits to our freedom, does it give way to our

In itself, freedom is an empty form which becomes effective, alive and
valuable only in and through the development of other life-contents. If we
analyse the events by which freedom is gained, we always notice, alongside
the formal and pure concept of freedom, a substantively determined content
which, however, by giving it a positive significance, also contains a certain
limitation, a directive as to what has to be positively accomplished by this
freedom. (2004: 401)

As ‘freedom is not something negative but rather is the positive extension of
the self into the objects that yield to it’, when cultural life is dominated by
interchangeable and essentially impersonal commodities, we encounter ‘an
interconnected enclosed world that has increasingly fewer points at which the
subjective soul can interpose its will and feelings’ (2004: 460). The market economy
makes possible an unprecedented degree of ‘independence from the will of specific
individuals’, but since the liberating power of money derives precisely from the fact
that it makes no specific demands on its owner, it cannot call forth from the latter an
inner bond of commitment and devotion. Like Hegel’s slave, money surrenders to its master too easily; encountering no resistance, the owner’s will is indulged, excused, and abandoned to its own devices. ‘Wherever the purely negative sense of freedom operates, freedom is considered to be incomplete and degrading’, Simmel observes. ‘This explains why our age, which, on the whole, certainly possesses more freedom than any previous one, is unable to enjoy it properly.’ (2004: 300, 401, 403)

The Moral Conversion: Existentialism and Max Weber

What is missing from the negative freedom of liberal economic rights is what Simmel referred to as the ‘sinking of roots’, or what Sartre called ‘l’engagement’. With his phenomenological account of the ‘nihilating’ power of consciousness, or ‘being-for-itself’, Sartre might seem an unlikely ally to the sociological theorists of positive freedom. He was, after all, often criticised for endorsing a purely negative concept of liberty – an ontologically inescapable ‘ready-made freedom’, as Merleau-Ponty put it, which (like Berlin’s so-called ‘opportunity-concept’) has ‘no need to be exercised because it is already acquired’ (1962: 439, 437). Although Merleau-Ponty complained that Sartre had ignored the need ‘to transform into actual freedom the prenatal freedom which is there only to condemn us’ (1974: 161), Sartre was aware that his description of consciousness as ‘condemned to freedom’ implied a negative conception of freedom devoid of social and political mediations, and that his philosophy might be confused with the ideology of bourgeois liberalism.

Already in Being and Nothingness he had, in fact, written of the need for individuals to undergo a ‘radical conversion’ by which they consciously chose freedom as their ideal practice and goal (1956: 412 n14, 581). This idea of a ‘moral conversion’ from a ‘negative’ to a ‘positive’ articulation of freedom – a conversion
which Sartre himself seemed to undergo as his philosophy moved from existentialism
to Marxism – was then taken up and elaborated by Beauvoir (1948), André Gorz
(1977), and Francis Jeanson (1980). The point made by each of these thinkers was
that an individual cannot choose liberty – cannot claim authorship of that ‘negative’
freedom that he or she essentially is – without engaging in a liberating enterprise, and
an enterprise is liberating not when it disposes of the individual’s dependence on the
world but only when it deepens the rapport between the subject and its situation.

Merleau-Ponty, again, captured the positive nature of this rapport:

If freedom is doing, it is necessary that what it does should not be immediately
undone by a new freedom; one instant must be able to commit to its successors
and, a decision once taken and action once begun, I must have something
acquired at my disposal, I must benefit from my impetus, I must be inclined to
carry on, and there must be a bent or propensity of the mind. (Merleau-Ponty,
1962: 437)

The importance of this ‘bent or propensity of the mind’ is evident in that other
founding figure in sociology, Max Weber. It was Weber, after all, who argued that
even the disinterested scientist must feel an ‘inward calling’ for the profession, and
who followed Nietzsche in recognising that a science disenchanted with the false
morality of progress could only be endured by individuals, like himself, who had
consciously chosen the scientific vocation as their own personal faith. And this, for
Weber, was also the moral achievement of science, which could not tell the individual
what to do, but could help ‘to give himself an account of the ultimate meaning of his
own conduct’, thus ‘bringing about self-clarification and a sense of responsibility’ (1948: 134, 152).

The parallel between Weber’s understanding of the social scientific vocation and Sartre’s (1956: 626-7) description of an ‘existential psychoanalysis’ aimed at ‘revealing to us the ideal meaning of all human attitudes’ and showing ‘to the moral agent that he is the being by whom values exist’, is uncanny. Both perspectives support Charles Taylor’s contention that the ‘opportunity-concept’ of negative freedom defended by Berlin cannot be plausible unless individuals have already achieved some degree of positive self-realisation, removing the ‘internal’ barriers to their freedom by learning to distinguish and account for those desires which are most valuable and authentic to them. The meaningful exercise of those negative liberties secured by the bourgeois revolutions presupposes, in other words, the positive accomplishment of self-understanding and practical commitment (Taylor, 1985).

**The Politics of Self-Realisation**

In Erich Fromm’s view it was precisely this activity of self-realisation, this positive exercise of freedom, which had not kept up with the development of negative freedom, that is, with the freedom from the constraints of nature, custom and social position whose transcendence was the great achievement of the Reformation and capitalism. We are, Fromm wrote in *Escape from Freedom*, ‘fascinated by the growth of freedom from powers outside of ourselves and are blinded to the fact of inner restraints, compulsions, and fears, which tend to undermine the meaning of the victories freedom has won against its traditional enemies’ (1941: 105). While Berlin (1969a: 128) marvelled at the rational ‘fiery individualism’ nurtured by the highly disciplined communities of ascetic Protestantism, Fromm suggested that the salvation
anxiety arising from the puritan’s belief in the sordidness of human nature and from
the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, actually gave rise to the kind of feverishly
irrational activity that we would now knowingly associate with ‘compulsive
neurotics’. Repetitive behaviour, obsessive counting and ordering, is for Fromm a
psychological recipe for divining one’s security and fate in a world that one already
knows is out of one’s control. The Protestant reformers thus ‘psychologically
prepared man for the role which he had to assume in modern society: of feeling his
own self to be insignificant and of being ready to subordinate his life exclusively for
purposes which were not his own.’ For Fromm, it was not positive freedom but its
absence which led people to flee the isolation and helplessness of negative freedom
and surrender instead to totalitarian movements promising deliverance from the
turmoil of capitalist modernity. ‘Thus freedom – as freedom from – leads into new
bondage.’ (Fromm, 1941: 92, 111, 257)

Today, of course, such bondage seems a distant and unlikely threat, and
Fromm’s ruminations on the poverty of the modern self and its susceptibility to
inauthenticity and conformism would strike many readers as quaint, if not frankly
patronising. The post-war economic boom raised the confidence of a new generation
of workers and consumers, and created a more liberal social and psychological
landscape with plentiful opportunities for therapeutic self-understanding and
individual fulfilment. Giddens registered this change at the level of political
discourse, distinguishing between an older ‘emancipatory politics’ whose protagonists
were ‘concerned with the liberation from inequality or servitude’, and a new ‘life
politics’ or ‘politics of self-actualisation’, which is concerned with personal
responsibility, global interdependency, and life decisions (1990: 156). For Giddens,
the new politics of positive freedom grew out of the achievements of negative
freedom. The emergence of life politics ‘presumes (a certain level of)… emancipation
from the fixities of tradition and from conditions of hierarchical domination’ (1991:
214). Its essential task is to ask ‘those moral and existential questions’ which are
unanswerable by science and ‘repressed by the core institutions of modernity’ (1991:
223) – questions which, incidentally, Weber believed Tolstoy had already formulated
with perfection: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’ (Weber, 1948: 143).¹
‘This is’, Giddens concedes, ‘a version of the old distinction between “freedom
from” and “freedom to”, but “freedom to” has to be developed in the light of a
framework of utopian realism.’ (1990: 156)

Since it goes beyond the ‘opportunity’ to choose and addresses itself, instead,
to what we should choose, the modern politics of self-actualisation described by
Giddens and prefigured in Fromm’s humanism seems to represent a welcome
resurgence of the neglected ideal of positive freedom. Its most obvious origin is the
social and cultural revolution of the 1960s – though it probably has much longer
historical roots, at least according to Campbell’s (1987) account of that ‘other’
Protestant ethic which gave rise to the Romantic sensibility associated with modern
consumerism. The post-war growth in incomes and leisure time, the correlative
diversification of lifestyle choices, the expansion of higher education and, with it, a
proliferating aptitude for questioning, self-questioning, and self-discovery, and post-
Taylorist changes in the nature of work and the management of labour, were some of
the material and intellectual factors whose ‘elective affinity’ gave rise to what
Honneth (2004) has described as a ‘new individualism’ centred on the positive
accomplishment of authenticity and self-realisation.

The fact that the maturation of these trends also coincided with the economic
revolution of neo-liberalism, however, makes for cautionary analysis. Such caution
has indeed a venerable history, particularly amongst American commentators. Herbert Marcuse, for example, worried that the liberalisation of social attitudes in the prosperous West had become a form of ‘repressive tolerance’, a kind of controlled or repressive de-sublimation of desire that had converted the radical need for freedom into commodity-friendly impulses, enabling capitalism to ‘extend liberty while intensifying domination’ (1964/1991: 72; 1965). Marcuse’s fears were not too different to those of Richard Sennett (1977/2002), who interpreted the introspective politics of authenticity as symptomatic of a crisis of public culture and an enfeeblement of the will necessary to face the knocks and challenges of genuine political action. In a similar vein, Russell Jacoby condemned the ‘social amnesia’ of those Freudian revisionists who had encouraged a ‘politics of subjectivity’ devoid of dialectical analysis, the legacy of which was a commodified image of the individual as an ‘atomised particle’ promised an ‘afterlife as an advertisement for itself’ (1975: 105). It was Christopher Lasch (1979) who famously brought these themes together, denouncing the spread of a ‘culture of narcissism’ and a cult of ‘pseudo-self-awareness’ that had, by cutting individuals off from the real conditions of their existence, made them even more prone to the ‘social invasion of the self’.

In France, too, the failure of May ’68 had prompted a wave of anti-humanist philosophical browbeating (see Ferry and Renaut, 1990). Régis Debray, for example, saw the cunning ruse of consumer capitalism at work in the cultural revolutionaries’ rejection of social boundaries and conventions:

What first appeared as constraints on individual existence turned out to be constraints on turning the entire social field into commodities…Only a blaze of *subjectivity* could impose the law of the marketable *object* on those who
rejected it…The arrangement was made with the agreement of the future
victims, whose consent could only be extracted in the form of disagreement.
Order by way of revolt. The sincerity of the actors of May was accompanied,
and overtaken, by a cunning of which they knew nothing…[T]he May
revolutionaries were the entrepreneurs of the spirit needed by the bourgeoisie.
(1979: 48, emphasis in original)

Of course it was Foucault and his followers who took this suspicion of
subjectivity to its logical conclusion, theorising modern power as a productive force
that constructed the very self whose freedom many among the New Left were
claiming as an entitlement to self-actualisation. A Foucauldian genealogy of freedom
would almost certainly find that negative and positive freedom have rarely been the
antagonists that Berlin imagined. After all, Berlin himself recognised the need for
states to prevent negative freedom from endangering itself, and, as Honneth (1999)
points out, he combined his own defence of negative liberty with an emphasis on the
right to cultural belonging, implying that the positive freedom to belong to a
community of shared values was the precondition for the negative freedom he so
famously championed. Before him, classical liberals like John Stuart Mill and Adam
Smith were inclined to promote negative liberty not as an end in itself but as the most
effective means for the cultivation of specific moral sentiments and virtues of
character and community which were assumed to be beyond question. Even
Durkheim’s favourite utilitarian exemplar, Herbert Spencer, had argued that social
equilibrium in advanced societies presupposed the adaptive acquisition of altruistic
sentiments and a concern for the liberty of others, suggesting, as Offer (2010: 179-95)
observes, a version of ‘moral individualism’ not dissimilar to Durkheim’s. In
structural terms, the negative freedom of the market economy was, as Karl Polanyi (1957) showed, a positive accomplishment of the mercantile state, just as the enterprise society of more recent times, disguised as natural and spontaneous in neoliberal discourse, has been constructed by ‘an active, intense, and interventionist social policy’ aimed, amongst other things, at transforming the worker’s negative freedom of exchange into the positive obligation to be self-productive, to be ‘an entrepreneur of himself’ (Foucault, 2010: 160, 226).

From their very inception, in other words, the negative economic liberties of capitalism were shaped, moderated and mediated by welfare policies and regulatory laws, and by standards of civility and norms of responsibility, discipline and self-restraint, which provided the language of personhood and the ‘technologies of the self’ integral to the definition of what it meant to be a free and enterprising individual. We are, in Nikolas Rose’s words, ‘governed as much through subjectification as through objectification’ (1999: 95). Negative freedom and its ‘positive’ regulation are, from this perspective, two sides of the same coin – the currency of which, since we must now recognise that we are ‘governed through our freedom’, obliges us to ‘abandon the political calculus of domination and liberation’ (Rose, 1999: 95, 62).

**Self-Identity is not Positive Freedom**

Can we afford to be so sanguine? Has neoliberalism truly reconciled the cultural contradiction between the performance principle and the leisure principle that Daniel Bell (1976) suggested could be the undoing of consumer capitalism? Or worse, has Berlin’s fear regarding the dangers of positive freedom actually materialised, albeit in the shape of the self-regulated and enrolled worker and consumer, rather than the oppressed subject of the totalitarian state? We would have to answer in the affirmative
if the culture of authenticity and self-realisation described above really corresponded to what the classical sociologists understood by ‘positive freedom’. If there is reason to doubt this, then it is reason obscured by the tendency to conflate freedom with individualism, and to reduce positive freedom to the assertion of self-identity.

‘Emancipatory politics is a politics of life chances’, Giddens writes. ‘Life politics’, by contrast, ‘is a politics of identity’ (1994: 90-1). Even Foucault (1988, 1991), flirting with an ethical idea of freedom in his final years, fell into this trap, reducing freedom to expressive ‘practices of the self’, and ignoring that ‘practical-critical activity’, that political praxis, by which people act collectively to change the world rather than just interpret their place in it (Marx, 1975b).

Retaining the distinction between positive freedom and self-identity is important because, although we might think of ‘identity work’ as a social enterprise that cannot be conducted in complete isolation, when self-identity is an individual project then society is conceived as a means for the achievement of what is essentially an anti-social goal. In sociological terms, this is a negative, not a positive, freedom; to use Hirschman’s (1970) terminology, it is an expression of ‘exit’ from, rather than ‘voice’ for, the shaping of the social good. This remains the case even where personal expression is amplified by social media. As Malcolm Gladwell observes, digital networking technologies rarely foster those strong bonds of loyalty and commitment that give people the confidence to ‘persevere in the face of danger’ – that is, to put their ‘identity’ at risk in order to achieve a more meaningful social goal. They make it ‘easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact’ (Gladwell, 2010: 49).
Positive Freedom and the Public Sphere

Self-identity and individual self-realisation is not positive freedom because the latter, as the founders of the sociological tradition better understood, is a commitment that places the world, not the self, at the centre of one’s concern; it expresses that ‘wordliness’ which Hannah Arendt regarded as the hallmark of the political actor. Arendt described ‘freedom from politics’ as ‘one of the most important negative liberties we have enjoyed since the end of the ancient world’ (1990: 280). But she also insisted that ‘liberation and freedom are not the same’, that ‘the notion of liberty implied in liberation can only be negative’, and that positive freedom could only unfold through ‘participation in public affairs, or admission to the public realm’ (1990: 280, 29-33). Arendt also denounced the long-standing identification of freedom with ‘sovereignty’ – ‘the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership’ more appropriate to the solitary activity of the maker (1958: 234-5) – arguing that Marxism as much as liberalism was guilty of this mistake, the fetishising of the worker-as-creator finding its counterpart in the utilitarian defence of the sovereign consumer. Since freedom, for Arendt, was by definition a political affair, it could only be realised by the plurality of actors who inhabit the public sphere, and whose differing purposes and perspectives mean that no individual can be the absolute master of the social world, nor the final arbiter of its meaning. ‘Under human conditions, which are determined by the fact that not man but men live on the earth, freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously’, she wrote. ‘If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.’ (1977: 164-5)

As a political theorist Arendt wanted to extricate the concept of freedom from economic and productivist interpretations, to resist the slide towards subjectivism and
the ‘worry and care about the self’ that she believed Weber had identified as the motivational origin of capitalism, and to reinsert the adjective ‘public’, which had been a standard qualifier until the phrasing of the Declaration of Independence, into the ‘happiness’ that American citizens had claimed the private right to pursue (Arendt, 1958: 254; 1990: 127-9). As Sennett, a former student of Arendt, defended the eighteenth-century understanding of the difference between public life on the one hand, and personal needs and self-identities on the other: ‘“Public” behaviour is a matter, first, of action at a distance from the self, from its immediate history, circumstances, and needs; second, this action involves the experiencing of diversity.’ The public sphere is ‘the forum in which it becomes meaningful to join with other persons without the compulsion to know them as persons’ (1997/2002: 87, 340).

The French social theorist André Gorz was also a long-running critic of productivism and a famous advocate of a ‘post-work’ society in which culture and politics are civilised and reinvigorated by an abundance of time. Less well known than his political writings is his intellectual self-portrait, *The Traitor*, which was first published in the same year as Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (1958). What makes *The Traitor* particularly relevant to this discussion is that it traces, in a uniquely personal way, the process by which the individual’s search for positive freedom, if it is to be at all successful, leads away from the self towards the world of others. It shows, in fact, how even somebody deeply committed to French existentialism – and to that Sartrean view of the ‘nothingness’ of the self that MacIntyre (1985: 32-3) condemned as the apotheosis of the dominant ‘emotivist’ conception of the individual – was able, by a literary endeavour that was both self-analysis and public engagement, to renounce his sovereignty and find himself outside himself, so to speak, in an uncertain and many-sided world.
Combining existential psychoanalysis with historical materialism, *The Traitor* documents Gorz’s attempt to accomplish his own ‘moral conversion’ from negative to positive freedom. Beginning with a description of his own ‘nullity complex’, which originally attracted him to nihilism and made Sartre’s notion of *l’engagement* seem implausible, Gorz takes the reader on a journey of self-reflection the surprising conclusion of which is not the establishment of a definitive identity or authentic self, but rather the realisation that freedom is something out there, in the world. It is because this world is always shared with other people that one can find one’s place in it only by choosing to do more than what one’s solitary will can account for: ‘a situation, provided one assumes it altogether, an action, provided one persists in it, always give back more than one puts into them and lead by their objective logic beyond one’s original intentions’ (1989: 271). Just as positive freedom, for Simmel, was impossible unless the object of that freedom displayed sufficient resistance to be handled and assimilated, so one cannot, as a political actor, enjoy the traction of positive freedom without a rapport with the different and often conflicting values and intentions of others.

We must want action to exceed its intention, for this is the price of its reality. We must want to be engaged by others more deeply than we thought or could be by ourselves. But to be capable of really wanting this (instead of producing merely an imaginary and vacant will, masking fatalism), we must still do so knowingly; we must know the total situation in which action, once performed, will take its effect, the side and the direction on which we want to be engaged. (Gorz, 1989: 272)
A half-Jewish refugee from Nazi-occupied Austria, it was Gorz’s displaced sense of identity which led him to the realisation that he was on the side of the dispossessed, for ‘when a man is evicted, imprisoned for his opinions, censored, deported, boycotted, gagged, starved, it is I who am the target’ (1989: 265). Arendt, too, argued that in a conflictual world one cannot engage in political practice without taking sides, scorning those who believed abstract moral principles and appeals to human rights could answer, for example, the threat of Nazism. ‘If one is attacked as a Jew’, she said in an interview in 1964, ‘one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man, or whatever. But: What can I specifically do as a Jew?’ (Arendt 1994: 12) Both thinkers defended a notion of positive freedom that avoided moralising idealism – such as that which characterised the ‘new Liberalism’ that dominated late Victorian England under the influence of T. H. Green – as well as the false universalism that Berlin, and indeed Arendt (2002), believed had made Marx’s ideas susceptible to totalitarian use. Both understood that positive freedom was a political affair, and that politics is not the expression of an authentic identity nor the unity of a common will, but rather the clash and contestation of interests – the latter being, as Arendt often pointed out, that which literally stands between individuals, which summons them to act in concert, but which relates and separates them at the same time. Both understood, finally, that positive freedom was a beginning, not an end, and that it binds us to an uncertain future – a future we can never fully foresee, but to which we are, nonetheless, engaged, accountable and committed.
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1 Although many of his novels and essays raise such questions, perhaps most memorable is *Anna Karenina*, where Tolstoy’s alter-ego, Levin, having grown weary of the contrivances of his gentry lifestyle, asks: ‘what shall I do? How shall I do it?’

And later, realising his brother is dying and recognising for the first time his own mortality: ‘I am still alive: what am I to do now?’