

1.

The Crisis of Freedom

The Exploitation of Freedom

Freedom will prove to have been merely an interlude. Freedom is felt when passing from one way of living to another – until this too turns out to be a form of coercion. Then, liberation gives way to renewed subjugation. Such is the destiny of the *subject*; literally, the ‘one who has been cast down’.

Today, we do not deem ourselves subjugated *subjects*, but rather *projects*: always refashioning and reinventing ourselves. A sense of freedom attends passing from the state of subject to that of project. All the same, this projection amounts to a form of compulsion and constraint – indeed, to a *more efficient kind of subjectivation and subjugation*. As a project deeming itself free of external and alien limitations, the *I* is now subjugating itself to internal limitations and self-constraints, which are taking the form of compulsive achievement and optimization.

We are living in a particular phase of history: freedom itself is bringing forth compulsion and constraint. The freedom of *Can* generates even more coercion than the disciplinarian *Should*, which issues commandments and

prohibitions. *Should* has a limit. In contrast, *Can* has none. Thus, the compulsion entailed by *Can* is unlimited. And so we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. Technically, freedom means the opposite of coercion and compulsion. Being free means being free from constraint. But now freedom itself, which is supposed to be the opposite of constraint, is producing coercion. Psychic maladies such as depression and burnout express a profound crisis of freedom. They represent pathological signs that freedom is now switching over into manifold forms of compulsion.

Although the achievement-subject deems itself free, in reality it is a slave. In so far as it willingly exploits itself without a master, it is an *absolute slave*. There is no master forcing the achievement-subject to work. Yet all the same, it is absolutizing *bare life* and *labour*. Bare life and labour form two sides of the same coin. Health represents the ideal of bare life. Today's neoliberal slave lacks the sovereignty – indeed, the freedom – of the master who, according to Hegel's dialectic, performs no labour at all and *only enjoys*. For Hegel, the *sovereignty of the master* derives from his rising above bare life and risking death itself in the process. Such *excess* – living and enjoying beyond measure – is alien to the slave, who worries only about bare life. But counter to what Hegel assumed, labouring does not make the slave free. The slave remains enslaved to labour. Now, the slave is forcing the master to work too. Today's dialectic of master and slave means the totalization of labour.

As the entrepreneur of its own self, the neoliberal subject has no capacity for relationships with others that might be *free of purpose*. Nor do entrepreneurs know what purpose-free friendship would even look like. Originally, being free meant *being among friends*. 'Freedom' and 'friendship' have the same root in Indo-European languages. Fundamentally,

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freedom signifies a *relationship*. A real feeling of freedom occurs only in a fruitful relationship – when being with others brings happiness. But today's neoliberal regime leads to utter isolation; as such, it does not really free us at all. Accordingly, the question now is whether we need to redefine freedom – to reinvent it – in order to escape from the fatal dialectic that is changing freedom into coercion.

Neoliberalism represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom. Everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty – emotion, play and communication – comes to be exploited. It is inefficient to exploit people against their will. Allo-exploitation yields scant returns. Only when freedom is exploited are returns maximized.

It is interesting to note that Marx also defines freedom in terms of a successful relationship to others: 'Only in community [with others does each] individual [have] the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible.'¹ From this perspective, being free means nothing other than *self-realization with others*. Freedom is synonymous with a working community (i.e., a successful one).

For Marx, individual freedom represents a ruse – a trick of capital. 'Free competition', which is based on the idea of individual freedom, simply amounts to the 'relation of capital to itself as another capital, i.e., the real conduct of capital as capital'.² Capital reproduces by entering into relations with itself as another form of

1 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology, Part One*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 2004), 83.

2 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), 650.

Capital: through free competition. It copulates with the Other of itself by way of individual freedom. Capital grows inasmuch as people engage in free competition. Hereby, individual freedom amounts to servitude inasmuch as Capital lays hold of it and uses it for its own propagation. That is, Capital exploits individual freedom in order to breed: 'It is not the individuals who are set free by free competition; it is, rather, capital which is set free.'³

The *freedom of Capital* achieves self-realization by way of individual freedom. In the process, individuals degrade into the genital organs of Capital. Individual freedom lends it an 'automatic' subjectivity of its own, which spurs it to reproduce actively. In this way, Capital continuously 'brings forth living offspring'.⁴ Today, individual freedom is taking on excessive forms; ultimately, this amounts to nothing other than the *excess of Capital itself*.

The Dictatorship of Capital

At a certain level of development, according to Marx, the forces of production (human labour, modes of work and the material means available) come into conflict with the dominant relations of production (conditions of ownership and domination). Contradiction arises because the forces of production never stop evolving. Thus, industrialization brings forth new forces of production that come into conflict with structures of ownership and government that still resemble feudal conditions. In turn, this contradiction

3 Ibid.

4 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), 255.

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entails social crises: pushes to change the relations of production. For Marx, the contradiction is to be eliminated by way of the proletariat's struggle against the bourgeoisie – which will bring forth a communist social order.

But counter to what Marx assumed, communist revolution cannot resolve the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production. The contradiction admits no dialectical *Aufhebung*. Capitalism can always escape into the future precisely because it harbours permanent and inherent contradiction. Accordingly, industrial capitalism has now *mutated* into neoliberalism and financial capitalism, which are implementing a post-industrial, immaterial mode of production – instead of turning into communism.

As a mutant form of capitalism, neoliberalism transforms workers into *entrepreneurs*. It is not communist revolution that is now abolishing the allo-exploited working class – instead, neoliberalism is in the course of doing so. Today, everyone is an *auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise*. People are now master and slave in one. Even class struggle has transformed into an *inner struggle against oneself*.

The cooperative 'Multitude' that Antonio Negri has exalted as the post-Marxist successor to the 'proletariat' does not describe the contemporary mode of production. Rather, conditions are defined by the *solitude* of an entrepreneur who is isolated and self-combating and practises auto-exploitation voluntarily. As such, it is a mistake to believe that the cooperative 'Multitude' will overthrow the parasitic 'Empire' and bring forth a communist social order. The Marxist scheme to which Negri adheres will prove to have been yet another illusion.

In fact, no proletariat exists under the neoliberal regime at all. There is no working class being exploited by those who own the means of production. When production is

immaterial, everyone already owns the means of production him- or herself. The neoliberal system is no longer a class system in the proper sense. It does not consist of classes that display mutual antagonism. This is what accounts for the system's stability.

Today, the distinction between proletariat and bourgeoisie no longer holds either. Literally, 'proletarian' means someone whose sole possessions are his or her children: self-production is restricted to biological reproduction. But now the illusion prevails that every person – as a project free to fashion him- or herself at will – is capable of *unlimited self-production*. This means that a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is structurally impossible. Today, the Dictatorship of Capital rules over everyone.

The neoliberal regime transforms allo-exploitation into auto-exploitation; this process affects all 'classes'. Such classless self-exploitation – which was something utterly unknown to Marx – renders impossible any social revolution based on the difference between the exploiters, on the one hand, and the exploited, on the other. Indeed, given the auto-exploiting achievement-subject's isolation, no *political We* is even possible that could rise up and undertake collective action.

People who fail in the neoliberal achievement-society see themselves as responsible for their lot and feel shame instead of questioning society or the system. Herein lies the particular intelligence defining the neoliberal regime: no resistance to the system can emerge in the first place. In contrast, when allo-exploitation prevails, the exploited are still able to show solidarity and unite against those who exploit them. Such is the logic on which Marx's idea of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is based. However, this vision presupposes that relations of repression and domination hold. Now, under the neoliberal regime of auto-exploitation, people are

turning their aggression *against themselves*. This auto-aggressivity means that the exploited are not inclined to revolution so much as depression.

In our world, we no longer work in order to satisfy our own needs. Instead, we work for Capital. Capital generates needs of its own; mistakenly, we perceive these needs as if they belonged to us. Capital therefore represents a new kind of *transcendence*, which entails a new form of subjectivation. We are being expelled from the sphere of lived immanence – where life relates to life instead of subjugating itself to external ends.

Emancipation from a transcendent order – that is, an order grounded in religious premises – is the hallmark of modern politics. Only under modern conditions – when transcendental means of justification no longer possess any validity – is a genuine politics, the politicization of society as a whole, held to be possible. Now, norms of action are supposed to be subject to negotiation at every level: transcendence will yield to *discourse immanent to society itself*. Society, the reasoning goes, can construct itself anew, purely from within, on the basis of *immanent* properties. However, such freedom vanishes just as soon as Capital achieves the status of being a *new transcendency* – a *new master*. When this occurs, politics lapses into servitude again. It becomes the handmaiden of Capital.

Do we really want to be free? Didn't we invent God so we wouldn't have to be free? Before God, we are all debtors: guilty (*schuldig*). But debt – guilt – destroys freedom. Today, politicians appeal to high debt rates to explain that their freedom to act is massively restricted. Free from debt – that is, wholly free – we would truly have to *act*. Perhaps we run up debts perpetually so we won't need to do so – that is, so we won't need to be *free*, or *responsible*. Don't our debts prove

that we don't have the power to be free? Could it be that Capital is a *new God*, making us guilty and debt-ridden again? Walter Benjamin held that capitalism is a religion. As he put it, capitalism represents the 'first case of a cult that creates guilt, not atonement' (*der erste Fall eines nicht entschuldigenden, sondern verschuldenden Kultus*). Since there is no possibility of relieving debt and guilt, the state of unfreedom perpetuates itself: 'A vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief seizes on the cult, not to atone for this guilt but to make it universal.'⁵

The Dictatorship of Transparency

Initially, the internet was celebrated as a medium of boundless liberty. Microsoft's early advertising slogan – 'Where do you want to go today?' – suggested unlimited freedom and mobility on the web. As it turned out, such euphoria was an illusion. Today, unbounded freedom and communication are switching over into total control and surveillance. More and more, social media resemble digital panoptica keeping watch over the social realm and exploiting it mercilessly. We had just freed ourselves from the disciplinary panopticon – then we threw ourselves into a new, and even more efficient, panopticon.

Jeremy Bentham's panopticon isolated inmates from each other for disciplinary purposes and prevented them from interacting. In contrast, the occupants of today's digital panopticon actively communicate with each other and willingly expose themselves. That is, they *collaborate* in the

5 Walter Benjamin, 'Capitalism as Religion', in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 288–91, here 288.

digital panopticon's operations. Digital control society makes intensive use of freedom. This can only occur thanks to voluntary self-illumination and self-exposure (*Selbstaussleuchtung und Selbstentblößung*). Digital Big Brother *outsources* operations to inmates, as it were. Accordingly, data is not surrendered under duress so much as offered out of an inner need. That is why the digital panopticon proves so efficient.

Transparency is demanded in the name of the freedom of information too. In reality, however, this amounts to nothing other than a *neoliberal dispositive*. It means turning everything inside out by force and transforming it into *information*. Under the immaterial mode of production that now prevails, more information and more communication mean more productivity, acceleration and growth. Information represents a positive value; inasmuch as it lacks interiority, it *can circulate independently, free from any and all context*. Accordingly, the circulation of information admits acceleration at will – for purely arbitrary reasons.

Secrets, foreignness and otherness represent impediments to unbounded communication. In the name of transparency, they are to be eliminated. Communication goes faster when it is smoothed out – that is, when thresholds, walls and gaps are removed. This also means stripping people of interiority, which blocks and slows down communication. However, such emptying-out of persons does not occur by violent means. Instead, it occurs as voluntary self-exposure. The negativity of otherness or foreignness is de-interiorized and transformed into the positivity of communicable and consumable difference: 'diversity'. The dispositive of transparency effects utter exteriorization in order to accelerate the circulation of information and speed communication. Ultimately, openness facilitates unrestricted communication – whereas closedness, reserve and interiority obstruct it.

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The dispositive of transparency has the further consequence of promoting total conformity. The economy of transparency seeks to suppress deviation. Total networking – total communication – already has a levelling effect per se. Its effect is conformity: it is as if *everyone were watching over everyone else* – even before intelligence agencies or secret services have stepped in to supervise and steer. Invisible moderators smooth out communication and calibrate it to what is generally understood and accepted. Such *primary, intrinsic* surveillance proves much more problematic than the *secondary, extrinsic* surveillance undertaken by secret services and spying agencies.

Neoliberalism makes citizens into consumers. The freedom of the citizen yields to the passivity of the consumer. As consumers, today's voters have no real interest in politics – in actively shaping the community. They possess neither the will nor the ability to participate in communal, political action. *They react only passively* to politics: grumbling and complaining, as consumers do about a commodity or service they do not like. Politicians and parties follow this logic of consumption too. They have to '*deliver*'. In the process, they become nothing more than suppliers; their task is to satisfy voters who are consumers or customers.

The *transparency* demanded of politicians today is anything but a *political* demand. Transparency is not called for in *political* decision-making processes; no consumer is interested in that. Instead, and above all, the imperative of transparency serves to expose or unmask politicians, to make them an item of scandal. The call for transparency presupposes occupying the position of a shocked spectator. It is not voiced by engaged citizens so much as by passive onlookers. Participation now amounts to grievance and complaint. With that, the society of

transparency, inhabited by onlookers and consumers, has given rise to a *spectator democracy*.

An essential component of freedom is informational self-determination. The 1984 ruling on the census made by the German Federal Constitutional Court already declared: 'If citizens cannot know who knows what, when, and on what occasion about them, the right to informational self-determination is incompatible with social order and the legal order facilitating the same.'⁶ That said, this ruling was made at a time when people commonly believed they were facing the State as an instance of domination, which wrested information from citizens against their will. Such a time is long past. Today, we voluntarily expose ourselves without any external constraint at all – without an edict commanding us to do so. Of our own free will, we put any and all conceivable information about ourselves on the internet, without having the slightest idea who knows what, when or on what occasion. This lack of control represents a crisis of freedom to be taken seriously. Indeed, given the data that people make available willy-nilly, the very idea of protecting privacy (*Datenschutz*) is becoming obsolete.

Today, we are entering the age of digital psychopolitics. It means passing from passive surveillance to active steering. As such, it is precipitating a further crisis of freedom: now, free will itself is at stake. Big Data is a highly efficient psychopolitical instrument that makes it possible to achieve comprehensive knowledge of the dynamics of

6 'Mit dem Recht auf informationelle Selbstbestimmung wären eine Gesellschaftsordnung und eine diese ermöglichende Rechtsordnung nicht vereinbar, in der Bürger nicht mehr wissen können, wer was wann und bei welcher Gelegenheit über sie weiß' (Urteile des BVerfG zum Datenschutz, at datenschutzbeauftragter-online.de).

social communication. This knowledge is knowledge for the sake of domination and control (*Herrschaftswissen*): it facilitates intervention in the psyche and enables influence to take place on a pre-reflexive level.

For human beings to be able to act freely, the future must be open. However, Big Data is making it possible to predict human behaviour. This means that the future is becoming calculable and controllable. Digital psychopolitics transforms the negativity of freely made decisions into the *positivity of factual states* (*Sachverhalte*). Indeed, *persons* are being positivized into *things*, which can be quantified, measured and steered. Needless to say, no *thing* can be free. But at the same time, things are *more transparent* than persons. Big Data has announced the end of the *person* who possesses free will.

Every dispositive – every technology or technique of domination – brings forth characteristic devotional objects that are employed in order to subjugate. Such objects *materialize* and stabilize dominion. *Devotion* and related words mean ‘submission’, or ‘obedience’. Smartphones represent *digital* devotion – indeed, they are the *devotional objects of the Digital*, period. As a subjectivation-apparatus, the smartphone works like a rosary – which, because of its ready availability, represents a handheld device too. Both the smartphone and the rosary serve the purpose of self-monitoring and control. Power operates more effectively when it delegates surveillance to discrete individuals. *Like* is the digital *Amen*. When we click *Like*, we are bowing down to the order of domination. The smartphone is not just an effective surveillance apparatus; it is also a mobile confessional. Facebook is the church – the global synagogue (literally, ‘assembly’) of the Digital.