

The Struggle for Intellectual Freedom

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“The public use of man’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men” – Kant

As paradoxical as it may sound, our atonal capitalist world is a world deprived of freedom. There is an abundance of everything, of material things, of commodities, of fragmented discourses, of returns of religion, and so on, but freedom being not a commodity itself is missing. In the face of it, this claim may not only sound absurd, it seemingly contradicts our daily experiences of freedom. The capitalist world we live in abounds in choices that arguably are not possible without freedom, which validates the perception that a choice directly gives expression to freedom. This is not necessarily false but insofar as choice can exist even in the totalitarian regimes, the notion of freedom attendant to it, needs to be qualified in more than one way. The notion of freedom that permeates capitalism needs to be analysed so that its immanent limitations can be exposed.

We might wonder what this general notion of freedom has specifically to do with intellectual freedom. Intellectual freedom, in a capitalist world, does not exist and cannot be understood outside this universe of commodities and monopolies. The concept of monopoly must be accounted for any time intellectual freedom is reviewed. It is not the case that one can say anything one wants; or more precisely, it is not the case that one cannot say anything one wants: one can and one does. To find the place in the shelves of the market of

ideas which confers upon it the status of intellectual and academic recognition – consider here peer reviews, for example – one has, however, to submit not only to the rules of academic publishing, but also to the neoliberal rules of university systems that are run like business corporations rather than educational institutions. Because of this transformation, from education to job-training, intellectual freedom is its first victim.

Intellectual freedom is intrinsically related to other forms of freedom to such an extent that although isolation or separation can be, sometimes a useful analytical tool, it distorts a reality of freedom. One cannot demand intellectual freedom without also at the same time demanding freedom for different classes of people and spheres of action. One cannot demand intellectual freedom without demanding freedom for all. The conundrum of freedom resembles the old dilemma between feminism and socialism of how, for example, to achieve effective equality for women. Equality for women, socialists once argued, cannot be demanded in abstraction from the equality for workers. The logic of this interconnection is simple: in capitalism, class division is the main social antagonism. This antagonism arguably manifests itself through various other antagonisms, but the principal antagonism, which colours all other antagonisms, is class antagonism. The struggle to achieve gender equality, for example, without at the same time fighting for class equality will at best produce only marginal improvements. This does not, however, mean that because class antagonism is the principal antagonism, other antagonisms should all be subsumed under class antagonism.

What this means is that every struggle for freedom and equality under capitalism has to incorporate class as one of its components. Thus, class is not an ontologically independent category of analysis, but rather it is merely the point for the intersection of all struggles for freedom and equality.

The same holds for intellectual freedom. The struggle for intellectual freedom under the conditions of capitalism requires attention to the dimension of class struggle. Class struggle however, is distinctly a concept that is disavowed under capitalism precisely because of the drive to separate public and intellectual spheres. In this context, Althusser's definition of philosophy as class struggle, in theory at least, becomes immensely relevant for intellectual freedom. What this means is that insofar as class struggle is necessary to banish the false idea that somehow intellectual freedom remains isolated from the capitalist mode of production, free and unhinged from other social struggles, that intellectual freedom can be preserved unscathed by what goes on in society and that no theory is true. From this perspective philosophy is not just a discourse of reason, a critical organon, but also the very point of intersection, the point of intrusion of class struggle in the realm of ideas. Further, it can be

considered the field of freedom par excellence, ungovernable by capitalism. The fields of philosophical inquiry and critique are a source of constant irritation to the ruling ideology of neoliberalism because it simply refuses to abide by one set of ideas or by one type of reasoning, but rather seeks to constantly undermine not just doxa and opinion, but also the ruling ideas. It is not surprising that in many cultures philosophy is suppressed and that in the Western world philosophical departments due to the deligitimization of philosophy as a critical activity in capitalism find themselves perpetually under threat of withdrawal of public funding and even closure.

These attempts must be understood to undermine intellectual freedom. Consequently, the concrete struggle for intellectual freedom must be fought in the realm of philosophy for the rights of philosophy departments to exist, not only alongside other departments that easily generate revenue and due to the fulfillment of practical needs are financially viable, but also as a willingness to include philosophy in other curricula. This is particularly so as a point which keeps other fields from closing in upon themselves and as a reminder of the necessity of intellectual freedom in theory and education. The struggle for intellectual freedom is to be fought on the terrain of the most apparently useless discipline under capitalism: philosophy.