

*Die Armut unserer Freiheit*

Axel Honneth

Suhrkamp Verlag, 2020

Freedom is increasingly used as a rallying cry for the political right. Neoliberal elites have long since invoked the idea of individual freedom to justify a pro-business, anti-distributivist political agenda. More recently, the power of the idea of freedom to mobilize right-wing populist protest has come to the fore—think of the chants of “freedom” that reverberated through the U.S. Capitol building during the January 2021 attack, or the horns of the “freedom convoy” rattling through the streets of Paris in February 2022. Political opportunists across the globe have been able to draw on populist resentment towards the political class to advance their neoliberal, anti-government agenda: all in the name of individual freedom.

How should a progressive political theorist respond to this co-optation of the ideal of freedom by the right? One response might be to point to the inherently limited character of the value of freedom. We should not expect freedom *by itself*, according to this line of thought, to deliver a progressive political orientation, since there are other values of equal if not greater importance, such as equality, inclusivity, solidarity, or the common good. It is these other values that right-wing neoliberal or populist politics neglect. Progressives who are opposed to such politics will, of course, still be committed to individual freedom but in a way that is tempered or qualified by other value-commitments, such as equality, inclusivity, and the common good.

Alternatively, one could argue that freedom, properly understood, *already* contains the normative resources required for a thoroughly progressive political orientation. The idea here would be that the co-optation of freedom by the political right is based on a faulty or

one-sided interpretation of freedom. On this view, it is not freedom itself but the neoliberal and right-wing populist understandings of freedom that are limited. The correction of this limitation would then go not so much by way of an appeal to complementary values, such as equality, inclusivity, and the common good, which neoliberals and populists neglect, but by way of an elucidation of the full ethical meaning of freedom, which neoliberal and right-wing populist champions of freedom fail (or are unwilling) to see. According to this line of thought, what progressive theorists need most is a renewed, expansive conception of freedom, one that is rich enough to expose the impoverishment of neoliberal and right-wing populist conceptions of it and robust enough to provide a political orientation in its own right, without support from external value-commitments.

Over the past decade or so, the theorist who has arguably done most to rehabilitate such a conception of freedom is Axel Honneth. Honneth takes Hegel to be the originator of the broad understanding of freedom we need today, and Honneth's most substantial contribution to the theory of freedom to date, *Das Recht der Freiheit* (2011, translated into English as *Freedom's Right*, 2014), takes the form of a critical reconstruction of and an update to the central claims of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. In *Die Idee des Sozialismus* (2015, translated into English as *The Idea of Socialism*, 2017) Honneth argued that the idea of "social freedom", as sketched originally by Hegel, provides the normative core of socialism and will continue to orient progressive politics into the future, so long as it is divested of its nineteenth-century industrialist trappings. The essays collected in *Die Armut unserer Freiheit*, written between 2012 and 2019 (several of which have already appeared in English), maintain this focus on social freedom. Some of the essays attempt to clarify – and, where necessary, amend – the theory of social freedom presented in *Freedom's Right*, while others attempt to fill gaps in the theory and take it in new directions. The theme of social

freedom is not always explicit, however, and some reading between the lines is necessary to see the relevance of some of the essays for the underlying argument of the book.

The gist of the argument is that freedom, in its fullest sense, is a *social* achievement. Freedom not only presupposes social relationships of a certain sort; it is also actually manifest in those relationships. It is a commonplace that social relationships, customs and institutions are conditions of individual freedom or are instrumental for the realization of individual freedoms. But the stronger thesis Honneth wants to defend is that social relationships and practices, at their best, are *constitutive* of freedom: we enjoy freedom, in its fullest sense, only insofar as we participate in those relationships or practices. Where we do enjoy it, we share that enjoyment with other parties to the relationship or participants in the practice; conversely, unless my partners or co-participants are *also* free in the relationship or practice, *I* cannot be free.

The “poverty” (*Armut*) of our freedom alluded to in the title of the book has two basic sources. First, there is the tendency to think of freedom as a purely individual affair, and to think of a free society as one in which the individuals who make it up are able to do as they individually choose (within the framework of the law), unhindered by others. If my freedom consists solely in my ability to do what I want, unaffected by others except in regard to legal constraints, then my freedom is “impoverished” in the relevant sense. “Negative” theories of freedom, and societies that are free only insofar as they realize and promote negative freedom, thus leave us impoverished in our freedom, but so, too, do “positive” theories that focus exclusively on the individual. For even if, like Kant, I take freedom to involve some autonomous shaping of the will, or some positive, rational determination of ends, it remains fundamentally my own affair as a rational, self-determining agent. By screening out the “social” dimension of freedom, both negative and positive theories leave us impoverished in our understanding of what it means to be free.

This much was recognized by Hegel and, after him, Marx. But their theories also leave us with an impoverished conception of freedom, not because they lack a concept of social freedom, but because their conception of the social is too narrow. Honneth takes this to be particularly true of Marx's theory, which, in Honneth's view, was problematically restricted to the social relations at stake in the material reproduction of society. Hegel's account fares better in this regard, but it, too, suffers from a failure to envisage the full scope of social freedom available to modern societies and, just as important, the potential for transformation of those customs and practices that promise social freedom but fall short in their actual delivery. Addressing the poverty of our freedom is thus not just a matter of finding freedom in our social relations as well as our individual choices or decisions; it is also a matter of enriching our social freedom through a transformation of our social relations.

There are gaps in the account of social freedom Honneth offered in *Freedom's Right* that mirror those in Hegel's theory. Two of them are particularly worth mentioning, as they provide a focus for the chapters gathered in the central section of the present volume.

First, like Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, *Freedom's Right* says very little about *educational* customs, institutions and practices (schools and so on). But as Honneth forcefully argues here, schooling is indispensable for the formation of citizens oriented by the norms of social freedom and thus for the citizens of a vibrant democracy. If children go through their education without learning the value of social freedom, or without having the chance to enact it, their capacity for social freedom as adult citizens will be diminished. This, in turn, would impoverish everyone's social freedom. The stakes of educational reform are thus extraordinarily high, and higher than what is apparent to political theorists unacquainted with the notion of social freedom.

Second, again following Hegel, Honneth's discussion of work in *Freedom's Right*, and the scope it makes available for social freedom, is focused on employment and the

*labour market*. The possibility of, and need for, social freedom in work outside the labour market, or freedom in work understood independently of the “ethical basis” of *exchange* (employment contracts), was largely ignored. As Honneth makes clear in an important modification of the perspective taken in *Freedom’s Right*, however, this is an unacceptably narrow understanding of social freedom in relation to work and seriously underestimates the lengths we still need to go to address the poverty of the freedom currently available to participants in the social division of labour (not just the labour market).

In these and other ways, the essays collected in *Die Armut unserer Freiheit* advance the theory of social freedom. Together, they help us to understand why neoliberal and right-wing populist “defenders of freedom” are not what they appear: at best, all they offer is an impoverished form of freedom. But just as important, Honneth’s essays also provide a timely reminder of the progressive possibilities of a politics of freedom. They show that we do not need to look beyond freedom for a progressive political orientation—we just need to look at it more closely.

Nicholas H. Smith

Department of Philosophy, University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA.