

The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom

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IN SOCIALISM, FREEDOM IS TO BECOME A REALITY. But because the present system is called “free” and considered liberal, it is not terribly clear what this may mean. Yet anyone who keeps his eyes open and has a little money in his pocket actually has ample occasion to familiarize himself with this concept. He may, for example, ask an acquaintance for a job in his firm. That has nothing to do with philosophy. But his acquaintance knits his brow and says that that is objectively impossible. Business is bad, he says, and he’s even been obliged to let many employees go. The man should not be angry with him, for it is not within his power, his freedom doesn’t extend that far.

The businessman is subject to laws, which neither he nor anyone else nor any power with such a mandate created with purpose and deliberation. They are laws which the big capitalists and perhaps he himself skillfully make use of, but whose existence must be accepted as a fact. Boom, bust, inflation, wars and even the qualities of things and human beings the present society demands are a function of such laws, of the anonymous social reality, just as the rotation of the earth expresses the laws of dead nature. No single individual can do anything about them.

Bourgeois thought views this reality as superhuman. It fetishizes the social process. It speaks of fate and either calls it blind, or attempts a mystical interpretation. It deplores the meaninglessness of the whole, or submits to the inscrutability of God’s ways. But in actuality, all those phenomena which are either experienced as accidental or given a mystical interpretation depend on men and the way they arrange their social existence. They can therefore also be changed. If men consciously took their life in society in hand and replaced the struggle of capitalist enterprises by a classless and planned economy, the effects the process of production has on human beings and their relationships could also be understood and regulated. What today appears as a fact of nature in the private and business dealings of individuals are the effects of social life as a whole.

They are human, not divine, products. Because these effects of life in society are present but not conscious, willed or controlled, and are the results of an equal number of individual wills that grasp neither their dependence nor

their power, the limitation on individual freedom in our time is immeasurably greater than would be necessary, given the available means.

35 When the businessman whom his acquaintance asks for a job refuses because conditions don't permit it, he thinks he is referring to something purely objective and totally autonomous—reality itself. Since everyone else, including the petitioner, feels the same because the reality they themselves created through their social activity appears as something alien by which they must abide, it follows that there are many agents but no conscious and therefore free subjects of social conditions. Men must submit to conditions they themselves constantly create as to something alien and overwhelmingly powerful.

Insight is not enough, of course, to change this state of affairs. For the error is not that people do not recognize the subject, but that the subject does not exist. Everything therefore depends on creating the free subject that consciously shapes social life. And this subject is nothing other than the rationally organized socialist society which regulates its own existence. In the society as it now is, there are many individual subjects whose freedom is severely limited because they are unconscious of what they do, but there is no being that creates reality, no coherent ground. Religion and metaphysics claim that such a ground exists. In so doing, they try to keep men from creating it through their own efforts. Of course, the present lack of freedom does not apply equally to all. An element of freedom exists when the product is consonant with the interest of the producer. All those who work and even those who don't, have a share in the creation of contemporary reality, but the degree of that consonance varies considerably. Those for whom it is high seem responsible for reality in a sense. They speak of "our" reality, as if they were royalty, and rightly so. For although they did not themselves create the world, one cannot but suspect that they would have made it exactly as it is. It suits them perfectly that the production and preservation of reality in our society proceed blindly. They have every reason to approve of the product of this blind process and therefore support all legends concerning its origin. But for the little man who is turned down when he asks for a job because objective conditions make it impossible, it is most important that their origin be brought to the light of day so that they do not continue being unfavorable to him. Not only his own lack of freedom but that of others as well spells his doom. His interest lies in the Marxist clarification of the concept of freedom.