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Freedom in the Work Situation

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1959f-e

First published to introduce the book *Labor in a Free Society* (edited by Michael Harrington and Paul Jacobs and with a Foreword by Clark Kerr, Berkeley and Los Angeles (University of California Press) 1959, pp. 1-16. – Reprint in the Yearbook of the International Erich Fromm Society, Vol. 3: *Arbeit – Entfremdung – Charakter*, Münster: LIT-Verlag, 1994, pp. 238-250.

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Freedom means many things to many people. Do we mean by freedom, a freedom *from* – freedom from drudgery, from monotony, from the stupidity of manual work, freedom from the irrational authority of a boss or foreman, freedom from exploitation? Or, on the other hand, do we mean a freedom *to* – freedom participate actively in the work process or freedom to enjoy work? Actually our concept of freedom today is essentially a negative one: It is freedom from and not freedom to, because we are mostly concerned with what we are against and not what we are for – against whom we should defend ourselves rather than what we are living for.

The word freedom shares this ambiguous quality with some other words that we frequently use. For instance, we use the word *democracy* and mean by it – more or less unconsciously – „consent manipulated without force.“ Or we use the word *equality* and mean by it sameness, rather than what equality meant originally that no man must be the means toward the end of another man. Or we speak of happiness and really mean unrestricted consumption.

In discussing that ambiguous term, freedom, I will try to say something about the psychological problem of modern man in general, and the worker specifically.

Little needs to be said about the basic economic facts of twentieth-century capitalism as distinguished from the nineteenth century – just this much: Today we live in an era of mass production, both in the sense of production of great quantity of commodities and in the sense of masses of people working together in a well-organized, smooth way without friction. Consumption is to some extent predictable by market research; it is managed by advertising – by creating needs synthetically. Mass man is confronted with the four great bureaucracies: the bureaucracy of industry, of labor, of government, and of the armed forces. These bureaucracies work together and form a network which interacts with the mass man, who is quite willing to be managed by them provided he has the illusion that his decisions are free and that he is „really“ the one who tells them what to do.

I should like to say a word about bureaucracy from a psychological standpoint because this has a bearing on what I have to say later. Bureaucracy is not simply admini-



stration. In any differentiated society we need administration of things, and we need even a certain amount of regulation of people. What I mean by bureaucracy is the administration of men *as* if they were things, or, to quote Marx, to relate to men as objects. This attitude is inherent in every bureaucracy. The problem of bureaucracy, in the sense I have in mind, is not the question of cruel versus human treatment of people. When we think of the Russians, we always emphasize that they treat the people cruelly. This is not the point here. Furthermore, the problem is not only one of bureaucracy – as if bureaucracy took over and the unwilling people were forced to submit to it. Bureaucracy is a relationship between the bureaucrat and his objects, the people. The bureaucrat treats people as things, and people agree to be treated as things as long as they don't know it, as long as they have their initials on their sportshirts or handbags, as long as they have the illusion of individuality and freedom.

Modern capitalism, then, needs men who cooperate smoothly and in large numbers, who want to consume ever more, and whose tastes are standardized and can be easily influenced and anticipated; men who feel free and independent – not subject to any authority or principle or conscience – yet willing to be commanded to do what is expected of them, to fit into the social machine without friction; to be guided without force, led without leader, prompted without aim – except the one to make good – to be on the move, to function, go ahead.

The paradox in the relationship between the bureaucrats and their followers is that the bureaucrats have no aim and the followers have no aim, but each group thinks that the other one has an aim. That is to say, the followers think the bureaucrats know what they are doing and where they are going; and the bureaucrats, in a vague sense, think that their followers have told them where to go. Actually the two are like the two blind men who walk on the street each thinking the other sees.

We are concerned with instrumentalities – with *how* we are doing things; we are no longer concerned with *why* we are doing things. We build machines that act like men and we want to produce men who act like machines. Our danger today is not that of becoming slaves, but of becoming automatons.

Indeed, means have become ends. Material production once was supposed to be a means for a more dignified, happier life, and the aim was clearly the fuller, more dignified, more human life. Today production and consumption have become ends in themselves. Nobody asks any longer, *why* or *what for*? We are happy discovering *how* we can produce more. In fact, our economic system is based on ever-increasing consumption and production. But *why* we want to produce more, *why* we want this, that, and the other – this is a question which is not asked.

Let us take another example. We are all eager to save time. But what do we do with the time we have saved? We are embarrassed and we try to kill it. Anyone who knows the presentday situation realizes what would happen to the United States if we had a general 20-hour work week today. We would have thousands more psychiatrists to take care of the nervous breakdowns which would occur if people would have that much more free time on their hands without knowing what to do with it.

Our consumption also is an end in itself. You might say that modern man's concept of heaven is a tremendous department store with new things every day, and with



enough money to buy everything he pleases. We are the eternal sucklings, drinking in cigarettes and lectures and movies and television. Many people speak of love as one talks of milk. „The child didn't get enough love, it didn't get enough affection.“ You drink it in. That is exactly the picture described in the *Brave New World* by Huxley. „Why postpone a satisfaction until tomorrow when you can have it today?“

If I may add a footnote: It has been said that the change in sex mores which happened after 1914 is due to Freud. I think this is erroneous. Freud above all was a Puritan and nothing was further from his thoughts than the advocacy of uninhibited sexual activity. Freud was only used for the purposes of our consumption craziness. We want to satisfy every need immediately – the need for sex, a car, television.

To speak from another standpoint, man, being preoccupied with the production of things, has unconsciously transformed himself into a thing. Consciously we talk about our dignity and all the things which are based on a tradition of hundreds and even thousands of years. But actually, most people unconsciously speak of themselves as things and treat each other as things. A person might come to a psychoanalyst – a person he has never seen before – and tell his tragic life story as if he complained to a garage mechanic that the car has stalled. This problem is related to a central issue – to the phenomenon of alienation. The term comes from Hegel; it was a central issue with Marx; and all existentialist philosophy is a reaction to alienation – from Kierkegaard to Sartre and in the most significant existentialist philosopher, Marx.

It is one of the peculiar phenomena of our present-day culture that, aside from the Old Testament, there is hardly any book which is so much talked about as Marx and so little known. The Russians have claimed that they represent Marx's ideas, yet they represent exactly the opposite. They are the most reactionary regime in Europe. I am not speaking of the terror but of their school system, their social relations; they are about where Europe was in 1830, in a period of fast accumulation of capital. But certainly they have nothing whatever to do with the aims of Marx, and we do them a tremendous service by confirming to the world their own claim that they represent the aims of Marx.

To talk about alienation we might start with a concept which is clear to anyone who knows the Old Testament – the concept of *idolatry*. The prophets had as their main object the fight against idolatry. This is often understood to mean that they believed in one god and the others in many gods and that this numerical difference is the point of monotheism. But this is not so at all. The concept of idolatry is clearly defined in the Old Testament as man bowing down and worshiping the work of his own hands. As one of the prophets expressed it so beautifully: Here you have a piece of wood; one half you take and make a fire and warm yourself, or boil your meat; with the other half you make a statue, and this statue you worship as your god. Or as one of the psalms said: „They have ears and they do not hear; they have eyes and they do not see; they have hands and they do not touch.“ That is to say, man disowns his own creative power, transfers it to an object and then worships his own power in an alienated form, by worshiping the idol. He does not experience himself any more as a creator, as a subject of these powers; he is in touch with himself only by the indirect and alienated way of being in touch with that which his own power has created. A quotation from Marx shows how closely related this definition is to the concept of idolatry in the Old Testa-



ment. Marx said, „Man's own act becomes to him an alien power, standing over and against him instead of being ruled by him.“ And he goes on to say that all history is also the history of man's alienation from himself and from his own human power; that history is the consolidation of our own product to an objective power above us – outgrowing our control, defeating our expectations, alienating our calculations; that man has been the object of circumstances; and that he must become the subject so that man becomes the highest theme for man.

The history of the Christian Church provides another example of idolatry. What was Luther protesting against when he separated from the Catholic Church? There were many issues, but one of them was that in the Church man faced God only through the bureaucracy of the Church, through the priests. In other words, man was alienated from God; he did not face God directly but was instead in touch with a priest through whom he was put in touch with God. So Luther protests, insisting that each man is an individual who should and can be in direct touch with God.

This Lutheran tradition is one of the bases of our modern concept of freedom and individuality. And yet what do we see today? We see exactly the same situation that Luther fought. Church membership and participation in services is, relatively, the highest in a hundred years. And what is the result? Ours is a very unreligious culture. Here we see the fact of alienation. By belonging to a church, by attending a service on Sunday, the individual has the conscious feeling of being in touch with God – with his own spiritual powers. But in reality it is idolatry and alienation because he does not have a religious experience. He only has a quasi-religious experience by being in touch with those powers to whom the religious experience is delegated.

The same happens in our social situation. The American citizen today is concerned almost exclusively with private problems. By „concerned,“ I mean enough interested in a problem to lose one's sleep sometimes, not merely just to talk about it. He loses his sleep about health, money, and family problems. He does not lose his sleep about problems of society, because he has cut himself off from the experiences of social concern, from the relatedness to others as part of his life. He is a private individual with only private interests, separated from a general interest in the whole, and has projected his social relatedness to government, to the specialist. If he goes to the polls, which 40 per cent to 50 per cent never do, then he does about the same as going to church on Sunday. He is under the illusion that by being in touch with those who represent him as a social being, he himself experiences his social relatedness. He does not.

We as a nation are being ruled by things and circumstances, and there was never an age in which the fact was demonstrated in such a terrifying way as today. Because today, indeed, we are ruled by the bomb. The bomb is something of our making. The circumstances, the various governments are things of our making; and yet we have become almost helpless prisoners of circumstances which might lead any day to the destruction of everything alive and everything we value. We know this fact, yet we do not experience the affect of fear, horror, and protest that a normal person would experience. This split between thought and affect, a mechanism characteristic for schizophrenia, is characteristic for modern man. Yet, because we *all* suffer from it, we do not consider it pathological.



The result of this alienated schizoid life is something for which the French had a word one hundred and fifty years ago. They called it *la malaise du siècle* – the illness of the century, or *ennui*. Today we call it neurotic. We are indoctrinated not to feel unhappy, because if you feel unhappy you are not a success. But you are permitted to feel neurotic. So you go to the doctor, and you say you suffer from insomnia or you „have a problem.“ You have a car, you have a wife, you have kids, you have a house – you have a problem. Our way of thinking and feeling is that all the emphasis is not on „to Be“ but on „to Have“. We have much – but we are little. This attitude leads to defeatism, although it may be unconscious.

I believe, for instance, that although we all pretend to believe in democracy, many people believe in democracy only in the sense, as I said before, of „consent manipulated without force,“ and not in democracy as the voluntary, active, productive participation of responsible citizens. We all repeat formulas in which we have, at best, a half-hearted belief. As a result of this, we are insecure, we lack the sense of identity based on our convictions and our faith, and we get a sense of identity only by conformity; that is, I know that I am I – not because I have a conviction, not because I feel intensity, but because I am like everybody else. And if I am three feet away from the herd, that makes me very insecure because then I don't know any more who I am.

I would like to discuss now specifically the problem of work and the worker in the United States. This is difficult, because the working class in this country is not a sharply limited class today as it was in Europe and in the United States a hundred years ago. In many ways, psychologically speaking, the working class today belongs to the middle class just as everybody else psychologically belongs or tries to belong to the middle class.

What are some of the differences between the situation of the worker in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? The worker in the nineteenth century was exploited and excluded from humanity. The average nineteenth-century capitalist had no feeling of identity with the worker, just as he had none with people of other races. Actually he could exploit the worker to the extent that he did only if he did not identify himself with the worker; and the capitalist had to exploit the worker for the purpose of the accumulation of capital.

The worker in the nineteenth century did not work as the middle class did, on the basis of a Protestant-Puritan „drive for work“; he did not like his work – he worked because he had to. Work was essentially forced labor, and work was stupid. As a reaction to this inhuman situation of the worker, there arose the movement which was, in my opinion, one of the few genuinely religious movements in the nineteenth century, although it was not perceived in such terms. With the introduction of labor unions the worker began to experience his own sense of human dignity and solidarity, his sense of self, his own human powers. He had a vision of a non-alienated, humanistic society. The movement of labor unions had as its aim, of course, higher wages and a better standard of living, but by no means was this the only goal, and maybe not even the main one. This movement, like socialism, was originally a humanistic, a spiritual movement of human liberation and solidarity.

The situation of the worker today is different. The worker today is also the con-



sumer – and I mean the consumer in the psychological sense. Of course, he was always a consumer because he had to eat and drink. But he is now a consumer with the same craving for consuming that the members of all other classes have. The worker is not only part of the great consumers mass whose tastes and desires are manipulated by industry; he is also manipulated by the industrial bureaucracy in his work situation, by the union bureaucracy through his membership in the union, by the government bureaucracy because he is a citizen, and, if he gets drafted or otherwise comes in contact with the armed forces, he is manipulated by that bureaucracy too.

The worker has the same private and alienated concern for himself. The worker today does not dream so much of becoming president of General Motors or anything of that sort. But the new car, the new house, the new television set, the larger refrigerator – these are his dreams. These are his convictions, these are his hopes. He is caught in the net of bureaucracies; he is the alienated mass man, headed in the same direction of human automation as the whole society.

What is the meaning of work today? The generally accepted aim of our social effort is held to be increase of production and consumption. There is an axiom: What is good for production is good for the worker. And in the past few years the belief has gained ground that what is good for the worker is good for production. This new axiom has furthered efforts in the study of what is called „human relations,“ „industrial psychology,“ „human engineering,“ and all that kind of thing. One discovers that if the worker is happier he produces more effectively, and, since the aim is to produce more effectively, the conclusion is by all means – let him be happy. Then the question arises – what can we do to make him happy? The assumption is, axiomatically, that all the things which correspond to our ideology – participation, democracy in the work situation – make also for greater efficiency and productivity of work. There are many studies which prove this, but there are some studies which prove that sometimes it is not so – for instance, that a greater participation in work may not make for greater productivity.

Here we come to a basic problem of value. It is all very nice if the happy, democratic, participating worker also produces more. Such preordained harmony between the aims of production and the aims of man is wonderful. But what if it is not so? Are we in favor of participation in work as a democratic process even though it might lead to somewhat less production? This question is simply not raised, and most of our psychologists try to ignore it. We have the same problem today with regard to political democracy. You find many people who say democracy of course is very good. But what should happen if we find out that we are less efficient than the Russians? Should we still use our democratic system? Or should we say it is just a myth and we have to have a managed society instead of one based on the active, responsible participation of each citizen? We talk all the time about our ideas, our principles, and yet in reality we shy away from making value judgments which will commit us. Those judgments can be made only if one confronts the possibility that one may not combine the best of both worlds – God's and Caesar's – and there the problem begins. As long as one assumes that there cannot be a conflict between democratic procedure and maximum efficiency, one does not truly judge.

I am reminded of the title of Elton Mayo's famous book, *The Human Problem of an Industrial Society*. The title tells the whole story (although Mayo had his heart on the



side of man). Industry is a subject and it has a human problem. The question is whether we talk about the human problem of industry or whether we talk about the industrial problem of humanity. In the latter case, humanity is the subject which has an industrial problem. Between these two formulations lies the difference between two opposite philosophical, spiritual value judgments.

We come now to the crucial question: What are the conditions to make the worker happy? There are two main answers. One is that the worker can be happy within the work situation. Many suggestions are made to achieve this aim, such as profit-sharing – an appeal to the worker's interest in increased profit and often a concealed antiunion attitude; or making the worker feel that he participates – but the *feeling* that one participates is not necessarily the same as the fact of participating. Much of what is recommended as participation is fiction. The most important field in which one tries to make the worker happier today is called human relations, largely promoted by psychologists. Here a strange process is going on: In the name of the ideas of Spinoza and Freud, and particularly in the name of Socrates' idea that man should know himself in order to be himself, the very opposite is done. Man is manipulated and smoothed out to such an extent that nothing of his individuality is left. These so-called human relations are to a large extent based on an alienated concept of life that man is a thing and that there's a specialist to deal with this thing. If you belong to the middle or upper class you talk with a Freudian on a couch and with a non-Freudian in a comfortable chair, and you might have the idea that if you have talked long enough you will end up as the well-rounded happy person who has no problems. But if you are a worker, this is not possible. It is much too expensive to talk for years, for one thing. Instead, the talking is done for a few hours. That is in itself very nice in a culture in which nobody listens anyway. We are all polite to each other, like each other quite generally, and are not hostile. That is one of the good traits of our present-day American society. But we are essentially indifferent to each other and we do not want to listen. Hence one can speak to somebody who is paid to listen for one or two or five hours and perhaps sometimes even listens with interest that is in itself a pleasant or quieting experience. It helps to bear the drudgery of life for another year and then one may go back to the man and talk again. I do not mean to imply that all industrial psychology is of this alienated type. But I do want to point to the danger that psychology is often used for the purpose of further alienation and manipulation and that human relations in industry become the most inhuman relations one could imagine – inhuman not in the sense of cruelty but in the sense of alienation, of the „re-ification“ of man – the treatment of man as a thing.

The other answer to the problem of the worker's happiness is exactly the opposite. Since the worker can never be happy in work, this answer says, there is only one solution as little work as possible, as mechanized work as possible and he will be happy in his free time. This answer is accepted by many people, and in many ways it is a very plausible answer, considering the fact that the working week has changed from more than 70 hours in 1850 to 40 hours in 1950, that we are coming closer to a 35-hours week, and that it is not at all fantastic to of a 20-hour week in the future. All this, from the standpoint of the nineteenth century, would have seemed the most alluring Utopia.

But I cannot see that leisure as the answer to the worker's happiness is satisfactory. Leisure today means essentially consumption and passivity. A man who works 20 hours



a week would turn into the complete consumer; he would be exactly like the man in Huxley's *Brave New World*; he would lack the inner creativity or productivity which is the condition of genuine happiness. Work is not only an economical problem but a profoundly human problem.

My own ideas about the satisfaction and happiness of the worker are presented in my book *The Sane Society*. I have attempted to show there that the goal for the worker as well as for all other members of society must be to overcome the alienation and reification which pervades society. Man must cease to be the consumer and become a productive human being who is aware of and responds to his world creatively. This means, applied to the worker, that he must become a responsible and active participant in the whole process of work. There are many possibilities for more active interest and participation in the work process itself. (Georges Friedmann in his works has given important suggestions in this direction. Cf. G. Friedmann, 1950.) Increased technical knowledge could make even routine work more interesting. Furthermore, the factory is more than a combination of machines – it is an economic and social entity. Even if the work itself is boring, each worker can participate actively in the economic planning and the considerations preceding it, and in the organization and administration of the factory as a social unit where man spends the larger part of his life.

All this requires active participation of the worker in the management of the factory. How this can be achieved legally and socially is a question which transcends this discussion. Ways and means can be found, provided one recognizes the importance of the aim. One specific point, however, I wish to make. I wish to emphasize the error of popular Socialist thinking – misunderstanding the essential idea of socialism – that the most important point is the change from private to public ownership of the means of production. This idea was based on the overestimation of legal ownership characteristic for the nineteenth century. Today we can differentiate between legal ownership of a big enterprise (the stockholders) and social ownership (the management, which controls the enterprise without legally owning it). The problem of the future is to restore to man his initiative and activity. Applied to the worker, that means that work in the factory, technically, economically, and socially, becomes meaningful to him because he becomes an active participant in managing the life of the factory. Only then can he make use also of his leisure time in a productive way rather than as a passive consumer.

The worker can be the leader in the movement to overcome alienation and to bring the reintegration of man, because, in some ways, he is less caught than those who deal with symbols – figures or men. The manual worker sells his energy and his skill but not his „personality.“ This makes a great difference. His efficiency, his work, do not depend on whether he is a nice „personality package.“ The respect of his co-workers does not depend on that. It depends on how reliable he is; how well he performs his functions. In some ways, therefore, I would say there are possibilities for the worker to be less alienated than for the average person. I would say there is another possibility, the union movement, provided it could, instead of being a bureaucracy manipulating alienated men, become again a movement in which general and unalienated solidarity is expressed among men who share the same basic experience – their work. That, of course, would require the workers and the union leaders to have a different picture of what the function of a union should be. But I believe the union could perform an important func-



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tion in helping to change our history from the dangerous course of ever-increasing alienation to a direction in which man counts again, and in which he is not the *object* of circumstances that he has created but their master.

I believe it is necessary to realize that changes must be made in all spheres of culture simultaneously. It was a mistake of religion to think that one can make a change in the spiritual sphere alone and leave out the other sections of life. It was a mistake when those who misunderstood Marx proclaimed in his name that one can make a change in the economic sphere alone and everything good will follow. It was a mistake of political democracy to think that one can make a change in the political sphere alone. Effective changes can be made only if they are made in all spheres together, because man is not compartmentalized. One step in an integrated way is more important than twenty steps in one sphere to the exclusion of the others.

Our only alternative to the danger of robotism is humanistic communitarianism. The problem is not primarily the legal problem of property ownership, nor that of sharing profits; it is that of sharing work, sharing experience. Changes in ownership must be made to the extent necessary to create a community of work, and to prevent the profit motive from directing production into socially harmful directions. Income must be equalized to the extent of giving everybody the material basis for a dignified life and thus preventing economic differences from creating a fundamentally different experience of life among various social classes. Man must be reinstated in his supreme place in society – never a means, never a thing to be used by others or by himself. Man's use by man must end, and economy must become the servant for the development of man. Capital must serve labor; things must serve life. Instead of the exploitative and hoarding orientation dominant in the nineteenth century, and the receptive and marketing orientation dominant today, the *productive orientation* must be the end that all social arrangements serve. Freedom in the work situation is not freedom from work (in order to have leisure), it is not freedom from exploitation; it is the freedom to spend one's energy in a meaningful, productive way, by being an active, responsible, unalienated participant in the total work situation. The unions, by starting to introduce such participation within their own organization can make a first step in the direction of freedom at the work bench.

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