

## **Analog liberalism, vita activa, and the society of extras**

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*American Anthropology Association Meetings, New Orleans, November 17-22, 2010*

It should come as a surprise that “freedom is a concept about which anthropology has had strikingly little to say.” (Laidlaw 2002:311). Philosophical analyses of freedom in both its metaphysical and its political forms constitute a rich field; but anthropology has largely either accepted this tradition’s distinctions, or contested them obliquely. Issues such as the veil, female circumcision or our ethical orientation towards informants are frequent and somewhat hackneyed examples of a certain dilemma of freedom, but hardly represent a sustained scholarly engagement with the problem, much less a clear ethnographic field of investigation that might array differently, across cultures, the problems that the philosophical concepts of freedom and liberty track. Most anthropologists opt out of such an interest on the basis that the concepts of freedom and/or liberty are too closely allied with that of individual autonomy, individualism and more recently with the libertarian strand that associates liberty with property. So, to take an exemplary case, Saba Mahmood rejects the liberal political theories of freedom (and their communitarian critics) because they assert a distinction between the subject’s true or real desires (and the route to autonomy thereby implied) and those of social or cultural conventions and norms

**“How does one rethink the question of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be so easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for the self to achieve its potentiality?”**

Mahmood, Saba. (2005). *The Politics of Piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 149

which are in fact the medium by and through which the subject emerges (Mahmood 2005:148-150).<sup>1</sup>

The concept of ‘agency’ seems to stand in for a similar problematic as that picked out by freedom; but as Laidlaw points out, agency usually references the problem of the *efficacy* of an action, not its content (Laidlaw 2002:315-6). So while agency is appropriate to the pluralistic orientation to value common in anthropology, it says nothing in particular about the forms that political freedom or liberty must take.

More recently, the “anthropology of ethics” has emerged as another oblique way of

**Q. You say that Freedom must be practiced ethically...**  
**M.F. Yes, for what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [réfléchi] practice of freedom?**  
**Q. In other words, you understand freedom as a reality that is already ethical in itself.**  
**M.F. Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered for that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection.**

Foucault, Michel. (1997 [1994]). "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: subjectivity and truth*, Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Free Press, pg 284.

approaching freedom as a distinctive social and cultural field. But here the definition and variation of freedom *per se* is also not explored because it is (primarily) re-inscribed in a {#}

Foucauldian framework as a “practice” in the cultivation of ethical selves (Foucault 1997 [1994]; Faubion 2001:85ff). This is the domain that Laidlaw charts as a corrective to the absence of an anthropology of freedom: for Laidlaw (channeling Foucault), there is no

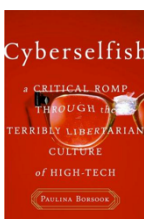
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<sup>1</sup> Although her ethnographic work is undoubtedly a fantastic body of material to work with in this respect, this particular rejection is not all that dissimilar from Isaiah Berlin’s characterization of positive liberty and its problems. For Berlin, the problem with a concept of positive liberty, specifically that articulated by the 19<sup>th</sup> century post-hegelian idealists, is that it posits exactly this split between a real subject of desire and one that is not yet realized, not yet formed, and must be brought into existence by some force. The difference lies only in the fact that in Mahmood’s case, it is the pietist mosque and its cultural system that might bring freedom into view for these women, and not a secular government that sees it as its privileged role to guarantee rights it presumes to be universal. Laidlaw’s critique of Durkheim follows the same course: Durkheim is Kant without freedom because Durkheim reduces the possibility of Freedom to the right ordering of a society that is the source of all human meaning and action.

universal Freedom, only a structurally and historically specific moment within which a subject can work on oneself to become a certain kind of person, and this variable practice is called “freedom.” For Foucault, the relevant object of analysis was not freedom, but the relations of power that obtained by virtue of the particular practices of reflection, inquiry and experiment, by virtue of which one might discover how to act freely.

All told, therefore freedom and liberty are not really ethnographic objects as such; either because they are too sacred (for the liberal-minded anthropologists) or too profane (for those anthropologists who question their corruption by individualism or identify the primacy of power and ethical cultivation). {#} Corollaries to freedom, however, are much more often the subject of anthropological theorizing, perhaps most obviously notions of domination and resistance (a species of the problem of agency), coercion and control, or at least implicitly, the substitution of “culture” as the proper label for the problem. Interestingly, the closely related problem of responsibility is similarly absent as a concept in anthropology, with the striking exception of one of its first champions: Lucien Levy-Bruehl. But that is another story entirely.

{#} If anthropologists are correct in the assessment that philosophical analyses of freedom over-emphasize the individual, the importance of autonomy or the association of liberty with property then the contemporary state of digital technology would seem to further entrench and exacerbate these atomistic, individualistic notions of freedom, and perhaps that of agency as well.



Innovative technologies appear to be valued according to the extent that they promote individual capacities for autonomy, self-mastery, individual expression and so forth. {#} Digerati in silicon valley are frequently decried

by anthropologists (and many others) as rank libertarians or utopian individualists with no regard for public and common cultural affairs. The technologies themselves appear to be individualizing: one device per person, as opposed to many people per device, for instance; and they tend to work only insofar as one adopts the subject position of someone attempting to actualize, assert and improve one's autonomy. The explosion of "social networking" seems an even more insidious form of reducing the fundamentally communal and social components of our lives to an app that



allows one to individually tailor the social fabric to one's autonomous freedom-seeking self. If an anthropological concept of freedom exists, then surely it is not to be found in these waters.

And yet, this seems to be precisely what is at stake: all of the high-tech, digital, networked, so-

called social platforms insists on its value in terms of freedom, democratization, participation, social and public generation of power, and so on. It's easy to cynically dismiss such claims, but it takes a different kind of work to explain why they seem to make sense to people (which includes the reaction of immediate cynicism), and how the structure of new, digital, social, media technologies does or does not reflect such claims. {#} At one level, an anthropology of contemporary culture has to confront the reality of our obsession with freedom and {#} liberty—to treat it with the same interest and inquiry

we lavish on topics like race, class, ethnicity and so on. At another level, we may simply lack good diagnostics for moving beyond the rhetorical and ideological surface.

However. The association of digital technologies with discourses of freedom, liberty, liberalism or libertarianism suffers from two key problems: one, a too-easy lumping of all kinds of diverse activities into the category of the digital, the computer, or new, networked, social media instead of a careful ethnographic or historical differentiation of its cultural forms (Kelty 2010); and two, a suspicion of such lumped-together technologies in which putatively pathological forms of liberty-loving individualism dominate the discourse and, it is often implied, dominate us through their imposition of new technologies that express this version of liberalism (sometimes conflated with neo-liberalism, libertarianism, or technocracy). Both problems demand that anthropologists—among many others—become more discerning in their understanding of both the forms technology takes and the forms that liberty-talk take.



{#} In the remainder of this presentation I propose three ways out of this conundrum, three approaches to thinking about the conjunction of new, digital, social, networked media and theories of freedom and liberty. What I hope to communicate here is that anthropologists avoid a focus on the digital *per se* in favor of a 1) rethinking liberalism as a cultural problem, 2) rethinking the anthropology of labor/work and the anthropology of consumption together and turning this conceptual equipment on the increasingly ubiquitous structures and platforms of digital, networked, social interaction and communication.

1. analog liberalism. {#}

Following the suggestion in the title of this panel that there might be a new form of “digital liberalism” emerging, one might ask what *analog* liberalism looks like.

What work might the qualifiers digital/analog do? Appending “digital” to the term liberalism suggests an association of contemporary technology (software, networks, computation) with the political theory of freedom. Replacing the term with “analog” accomplishes something slightly different: historicizing liberalism with respect to other kinds of technology—it’s origins with the democratic public spheres of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and their technologies of circulation—coffee houses, broadsides, pamphlets, newspapers, post, television, radio etc. From this perspective the definitions of freedom, liberty, autonomy and political rationality offered in conventional liberalism are already tightly coupled with a media-and-technology-saturated culture. This has to mean more than the claim that liberalism and its theories about liberty are features of the modern age—such a claim has been

uncontroversial since Benjamin Constant made it after the French revolution. On the contrary, the relationship between freedom, theories of freedom, and structures of communication and interaction is rarely if ever considered. One might read the works of Habermas and the Frankfurt school in this light, though in the case of Habermas, it is only as a temporary stepping stone to the construction of a universal notion of freedom. Better, one might see Foucault's injunction to study technologies of the self as a call to really look at technologies and their insertion into culture—and not only to observe solitary practices of asceticism or confession. One might, therefore, ask more precise questions about the evolution of liberty (and philosophies of liberty) with respect to technologies and their entanglement with economic, religious or aesthetic forms of life.

Whether or not one could properly re-inquire into the nature of liberty with respect to pre-digital technology, it nonetheless raises a more precise contemporary question: what is in fact new about the new, digital, social, networked media of the contemporary, such that it makes a difference to theories and practices of freedom? What differences make a difference?

Answering that question is not easy. It requires more work to differentiate and distinguish than most commentators or scholars seem willing to take on, particularly in political theory, but also in anthropology and sociology. First it requires being specific about the details of existing projects—how they are organized, how they are funded, how they are governed, what kinds of technical decisions have been incorporated, on which platforms, protocols, or infrastructures they depend. Second it requires being specific about the definitions of “liberalism” one might bring to



bear: classical liberalism, 19<sup>th</sup> century utilitarian liberalism, 20<sup>th</sup> century political liberalism, libertarianism, communitarianism, civic republicanism, etc. to say nothing of other competing theories of liberty and freedom that might be drawn from ethnographic work, for instance in the study of African political institutions, Melanesian definitions of freedom and autonomy (Maclean 1994, Strathern 1988), or colonial and post-colonial contestations of liberal political values.

## 2. Vita activa. {#}

A second response to the problem of identifying and studying digital liberalism is an oblique one: to question the relationship of work and play within these new, digital, social, networked media. Invocations of freedom and autonomy are frequently coupled with problems of equality and social welfare, of which work and labor are key nodes. Anthropological concern with problems of precarity and neo-liberalism generally turn on this relationship, and often question the assumption of individual autonomy perceived to undergird claims about why and where precarity emerges, or neo-liberal subjects fail to work.



New, networked, digital, social media trouble this equation further, especially where they trouble the distinction between work and play. {#} “Fun” for instance, is a frequently invoked

motivator in the domain of software programming, game design and new media.

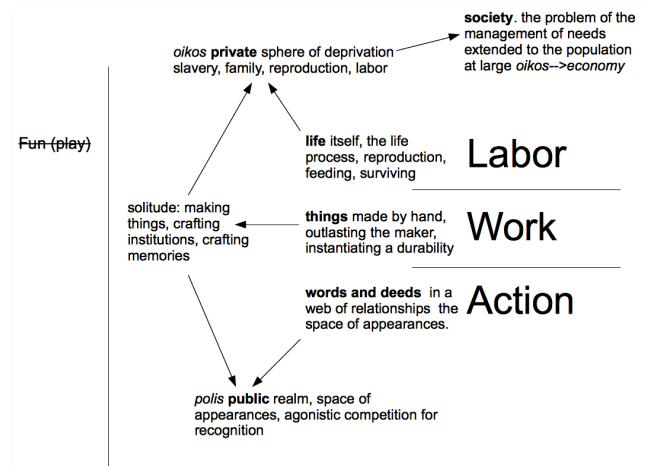
Fun and play are foundations for the creation of enjoyable, non-coercive forms of work-as-freedom, and one of the purest expressions of this has been the rise of Free and Open Source software, where the choice of work is perceived as entirely autonomous. Play is key to the new silicon valley aesthetic of work (Turner 2009; Malaby 2008) But it remains unclear what to make of this kind of “work”—whether it serves the same functions that classical labor is expected to (sustenance and remuneration are not really at stake here, except in a circuitous manner).

However, one approach to the problem can help clarify this a bit: Hannah Arendt’s distinction between work, labor and action in *The Human Condition*. Very crudely put, the distinction between work, labor and action allows us to separate out those activities concerned with sustenance and reproduction (labor, which happens in the private sphere) from those activities concerned with the making of a durable public world (work, the domain of homo faber), from those activities such as speech, story-telling or science which make sense of our situation in order to affect it (action).

Given this distinction, the crucial question for digital liberalism is not something like

“is work freely chosen?”—but rather, “where in this new environment does *labor* take place and where does *work* take place?”. Who are the laborers, slaving away to feed their families (the game designers, the system administrators, the call center employees in India?) and who is engaged in *work* (design, making, the creation of durable public objects).

Furthermore, to what extent can we see struggles in this domain as examples of a new kind of action: not political speech as it has classically taken form in the domains of



politics and government we are familiar with, but political *making* that takes place in the design of infrastructures, platforms, standards, protocols or devices? Who is involved in making the new infrastructures of circulation and participation within which atavistic forms of political participation (organizing, protesting, petition-signing) now take place (e.g. Anti-FARC protests organized on Facebook, so-called Twitter revolutions in Iran)? Nothing in democracy makes sense except in light of participation.

### 3. The society of extras.

One of the critiques frequently leveled at liberalism is its compatibility with the worst forms of consumerism. This has been particularly true of neo-liberalism, often invoked to identify the demand for individuals to become ever-more autonomous and to make right choices about behavior, spending, or education as a basis for becoming

full human beings. Consumerism in contemporary society nicely serves this political philosophy and vice-versa through the relentless provision of choices that need to be made in order to chase the ever-receding horizon of self-actualization. Natasha Schull's analysis of slot machine gambling in Las Vegas nicely captures this pathology in its purest form.

From the perspective of consumerism, therefore, talk of "participation" (or of democratization, openness, user-generation of content, prosumption, participatory culture, etc.) clearly represents a new level of this neo-liberal escalation of the responsibility

ization of  
the subject.

{#} If we  
take one  
popular  
apotheosis



of consumer society—the society of the spectacle—as a guide, what might this new round of “participatory” culture look like after the society of the spectacle? The art curator and commentator Nicolas Bourriaud provides a nice image of the transition: from the society of the spectacle to the society of extras. Rather than consumption ending in a conflagration of pure image—where spectacle as the film version of consumption replaces real consumption—it ends in the constant need for “extras” in the production of the spectacle. I find the image particularly salient now that I work at UCLA, and constantly see my students acting as extras in films that portray an

imaginary college life, but it is not the simulacrum that is troubling, it is rather how little they are paid to do so—in many cases not at all.

The reason this approach could be fruitful is because it articulates with the need to



rethink work alongside consumption. There is a new interest amongst scholars in “prosumption” (an

uglier word hasn’t graced academia since “glocalization”), but production is not the same thing as work... and combined with the mode of analysis offered by Arendt, a different vista might open up when one asks what it is we (they) are doing. From this perspective, the ever-growing demand for user-generated content, for discussion and feedback, for participation in the production of everything feeds a society of extras, paid less and less, whose role is ever more essential not just as new sources of surplus value (this is obvious), but as a new class of hard-working non-laborers. Or as Bourriaud puts it: “after the consumer society, we can see the dawning of the society of extras where the individual develops as a part-time stand-in for freedom, signer and sealer of the public place. (113)”

## Conclusion

Throughout this presentation, my relationship to questions of freedom and liberty has been avowedly subjunctive. I’m not sure I can accept the anthropological objections to liberalism(s) as they have been elaborated. In part this is because of a monumental non-

conversation between political theory and anthropology. Even the most beloved fellow travelers—people like Charles Taylor or Judith Butler—are loath to draw the work of anthropology deeply into their debates with the Rawlsians or the communitarians; and anthropologists, by contrast, rarely do more than reference these debates, or engage them at a distance (again, I take Mahmood's approach here as exemplar). Anthropologists, I think, should have the upper hand in resolving this non-conversation. It should be simple for us, at this point, to treat liberalism and its variants in a way analogous to how science studies has taught us to approach epistemological issues: as a political philosophy whose truth rests not so much in its arguments, as in its effective adoption world-wide—to see it as a cultural contest. This implies that liberalism is a lived political philosophy, a social imaginary perhaps, but something eminently subject to empirical tracking and differentiation. Anthropological studies of the neo-liberal variant of liberalism are only just beginning to approach it this way—as a real assemblage that needs explication. The domain of new, digital, networked, social media is also dreadfully in need of such a gestalt switch, if we are to understand the warp and weft of the political fields being created thereby, and the future of freedom on the horizon.

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